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A YOUNG GIRL'S ORDEAL; OR, "I LOVE YOU STILL."

BY SARA CLAXTON,

AUTHOR OF "WHICH WAS THE WOMAN?" "FOR HER DEAR SAKE," "LEAP YEAR," ETC., ETC.



"HE STAGGERED BACK, EVIDENTLY AMAZED."

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OR,
"I LOVE YOU STILL."

BY SARA CLAXTON,
AUTHOR OF "HER GUARDIAN'S SACRIFICE,"
"UNDER A CLOUD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

AN INCIDENT AT THE ACADEMY.

THE New York season was at its height, and the fashionable thoroughfares were thronged with gayly-dressed pedestrians and vehicles of a rich and splendidly-appointed character. Fifth avenue of course, was full to overflowing; and in the vicinity of Madison Square there was quite a flood of human beings pouring, for the most part, toward the great annual exhibition of pictures which, as all the world knows, is held in the Academy of Design.

It was a radiant day in June, and as the sun beamed in glowing rays upon the moving crowds of fashionably-attired people, the scene made up a brilliant picture of life, infinitely interesting in a variety of ways, and in many respects more impressive than anything of the kind which it would be possible to see elsewhere.

Amid the crowd which slowly moved through the entrance on this bright June day might have been seen a small group of pretty girls, who kept well together, and who were accompanied by a tall, elderly lady in spectacles, whose severe aspect and rigid mien unmistakably denoted the "proprietor of a ladies' seminary." And such she was. In fulfillment of a promise of long standing, Miss Frost, the lady above described, was taking a few of her favorite pupils to the academy.

Among the girls, there was one whose remarkable beauty attracted much attention, and whispered comments were indulged in by many as she stood with her companions on the steps, waiting to enter the building.

Alice Templeton—such was the young lady's name—seemed in no way conscious of the effect created by her presence, and she looked on at the bustling crowd with the curious interest of one unaccustomed to scenes of the kind.

She was tall and fair, with large dark blue eyes, a refined and sensitively-curved mouth, which, when she smiled, displayed the exquisite regularity and snow-white purity of her teeth. Though dressed in a simple summer costume of the most unpretentious kind, she looked far more impressive and dignified than those about her who were decked out in elaborate toilettes.

Her beauty, indeed, was of that character which lends an indefinable charm to raiment of the plainest order. Costly jewelry and all the fripperies of fashion would have failed to enhance the attractiveness of Alice. They would have appeared but poor and paltry things side by side with her native loveliness.

She suddenly became conscious of the fact that a young fellow, whom she had noticed a moment before in a carriage, was now standing close to her, looking earnestly into her face.

Then the crowd surged up the staircase and parted them, and she entered the gallery, and at once gave her attention to the pictures.

Miss Frost made every effort to keep her pupils together, and implored Alice, who was the senior pupil present, to aid her in this object.

But one by one the young ladies melted away in the crowd, and before long Alice, too, found herself free from the watchful restraint of Miss Frost, and at liberty to roam about the rooms without consulting the wishes of that sternly precise lady.

Alice had not been alone many minutes when she again noticed the young stranger whose steadfast gaze had somewhat disconcerted her down stairs.

He was with a party of three, whom Alice recognized as the companions with whom she first saw him in the open carriage at the entrance to the academy.

A tall and stately old gentleman, and a tall and stately lady of perhaps five-and-forty, were two of the party upon whom Alice bestowed but little attention. But a young, proud, and handsome-looking girl who accompanied them exercised a sort of fascination over her, and she looked again and again at the haughty but beautiful face of this attractive creature.

Her young and vivid fancy was soon busy with the probabilities of relationship which existed between this handsome girl and the good-looking young fellow who was at her side. They were clearly not brother and sister; and then, of course, her fancy insisted upon regarding them as lovers.

A pang of envy shot through her heart, and turning from this living picture, which her mind had invested with that romantic significance so dear to the imaginations of girls of her age (she was not quite seventeen), she tried to take an interest in the painted ones which hung upon the walls.

She had not been long thus engaged when she was startled by finding that the good-looking stranger was at her side, and that his eyes were again riveted upon her face.

They were in a retired corner of one of the rooms, where a few of the smaller pictures, which attracted but little attention, were placed.

Alice turned, and her eyes met his, and a quick flush mantled in her cheeks.

"I beg your pardon," he said, as he bowed and raised his hat, "but might I venture to place my catalogue at your disposal?"

Alice was for a moment confused by this unexpected offer; but quickly regaining her composure, she replied, in a formal tone, "Thank you, but I really cannot avail myself of your kind offer."

"Perhaps you think me forward for making it?" he said, in evident embarrassment.

"Well, to be candid with you, I do," she replied, smiling good-humoredly.

She found it impossible to preserve a repellent attitude when he manifested such unmistakable evidence of sincere and respectful feeling.

"And yet—" he resumed, and then suddenly paused, and looked at her with an expression of imploring tenderness in his bright, dark eyes. "Do not misunderstand me. No idle motive prompts me to speak to you," he added, in a low but earnest voice.

She hesitated for a moment; and then, unable to resist the winning charm of his presence and bearing, accepted the catalogue which he placed in her hand, and proceeded to make use of it.

"Are you fond of country life?" he asked, as they moved slowly from picture to picture, both still experiencing those mingled sensations of embarrassment and delight which young people are wont to feel under the circumstances.

"Yes; very much indeed," she replied.

"Are you fond enough of it to wish the 'season' over, so that you can leave New York and go into the country for the summer?"

"I am not interested in the 'season' at all, being, as yet, merely a school-girl." Then she stopped, and after a moment's pause, added, in a voice of deep feeling, "I don't think that I am ever likely to be affected by the arrangements of the fashionable world. But there! I love the country, and hope that circumstances may favor my desire to live in it always."

A quick look of sympathy came into his eyes, which she saw, and then she regretted that she had allowed herself to speak in such an open manner of her position and prospects.

"When do you expect to leave town?" he asked, after a short silence.

"Before the end of the present month, I hope."

"I suppose the prospect of returning home is very delightful to you?" he said, while smiling with cordial tenderness.

She was silent; but her face was working convulsively, in the effort to conceal emotions excited by his remark.

Turning from him, she quickly placed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"I fear that I have given you pain. I am very, very sorry! Forgive me!" he said, in a voice of tremulous sympathy.

"Oh, it was only a passing—" She tried, in vain, to continue; she was greatly disturbed, and it was with difficulty that she restrained herself from sobbing outright.

He gently led her to a seat, and sat down himself by her side, watching her quivering face with eyes brimful of tender feeling.

"I am a very stupid and unfeeling fellow," he said. "You are sure to hate me after this!" he added despairingly.

"Don't talk to me!" she replied, in a low, sad voice.

"I knew you would hate me! I feel as if I merited a good horsewhipping."

"No, it's not your fault. In any case, it is very foolish and weak of me to give way to my feelings."

Then after a moment's silence, she added: "I suppose you have a very bad opinion of me now?"

"On the contrary, you have strengthened the opinion which I first formed on looking at your face."

Alice smiled incredulously.

"Yes, I repeat it. I believe you to be a good, and generous, and noble-hearted girl!" he continued with great feeling.

"I really must not listen to such language! Recollect that we are strangers!" And she smiled sadly and bent her eyes to the ground.

"I know that we are strangers; but may I hope that we shall soon cease to be such? Do not turn your head away; pray look at me with those dear eyes, and tell me that—"

She rose abruptly from the seat, and in a tone of quiet dignity, said, "I am to blame for this. Had I resented your familiarity in the first instance, I would not now be subjected to your unwelcome compliments!" And she moved away in search of her friends.

In a moment he had rejoined her.

"Surely you are not going to leave me in this abrupt way?" he said, in a tone of earnest entreaty.

"What do you mean?" she replied, sternly.

"Now, don't be angry with me!" he urged, feelingly.

"Well, then, cease to use expressions which are offensive to me. If I were to listen, without protest, to the style of conversation which you have seen fit to address to me, I would soon lose all sense of self-respect!"

She was clearly determined to show this agreeable stranger that she would not stand any undue familiarity on his part.

"But I find it very difficult to address you in the cold and formal style which people adopt in ordinary intercourse."

"I don't see why you should experience any such difficulty."

"But it is a fact none the less. My feelings urge me to be perfectly open with you—to be as sincere and unconventional as it is possible for me to be. Can you not understand that condition of feeling?"

And he watched her face anxiously as he said this.

"Yes, I can understand it; but I can see no reason for it." Then, after a short pause, she added: "Your friends will miss you. Pray return to them."

"I know you want to get rid of me; and I suppose you have no wish to see me again. Is not that true?"

"Why should you invite me to say disagreeable things?"

And her face brightened up with a roguish smile as she thus parried his question.

"Then it would be disagreeable to you to dismiss me?"

"Certainly not, if you were causing pain to any one else by remaining in my society."

"Oh! my father and mother are not likely to miss me for an hour or so," he replied with a laugh.

"But—but—" Alice hesitated, then with difficulty added, "will not that dark young lady feel your absence?"

His face suddenly underwent a change; the bright and joyous expression which had hitherto characterized it vanished, and a look of disappointment came in its stead. Her inquiry had evidently caused him great pain.

His voice was low and faint as he now spoke to her.

"The young lady to whom you have referred will not miss me in the least. Perhaps you will give me an opportunity, an early opportunity, of explaining many things to you which it is not possible for me to clear up now. One favor I must ask of you—to believe that I am sincere in my desire to improve our acquaintance. Will you grant me that?"

There was something very gentle and touching in his manner as he preferred this request.

"Yes," she answered simply, not daring to lift her eyes to his.

"And now, when will you grant me the privilege of another interview?"

"Really it is not in my power to say."

Alice, in spite of herself, was beginning to feel very nervous and agitated.

She could not resist feeling that this handsome stranger already exercised an influence over her which made it very difficult to repel his tender advances; but repelled they must be.

"Could you not grant me even a few minutes of your time to-morrow?" he urged, with tender insistence.

"No; it is impossible. We must not meet again," she replied, in trembling tones.

"Have you no pity for me?"

"You will soon forget me."

"Never!—never!" he replied, emphatically.

She extended her hand toward him, and he clasped it with convulsive tenderness.

"I shall not relinquish the hope of again meeting you." As he said this he handed her a beautiful rose which he had been wearing in his coat. "Wear that for one day for my sake," he added, tenderly.

She placed it in the bosom of her dress, glanced at him for a second with eyes as bright and tender as his own, and then slowly left him.

She had not much difficulty in finding Miss Frost, who sternly reprimanded her and the other pupils for the breach of discipline of which they had been guilty.

In a short time they left the academy and returned to Miss Frost's academy, an old-fashioned but roomy brown-stone and brick dwelling in the adjacent neighborhood.

Alice now found herself hopelessly involved in romantic speculations born of this strange interview in the academy.

The young man, whoever he was, had made a deep impression upon her heart, and she knew well that as the days went by this impression would become stronger in its influence over her life, and would for years to come subject her to unwonted suffering.

She believed that he was occupying a very good position in society, and that his circumstances generally were of a character which would render a match between them impossible.

True, she was well connected, the daughter of a clergyman, and but a few years ago she enjoyed prospects which might, without any exaggeration, have included matrimonial possibilities such as those which now seemed so hopelessly beyond her reach. But the death of her father completely changed the aspect of her affairs. He left only a couple of thousand dollars for the support of herself and her mother, and a portion of this money was now being employed in giving her an education which would qualify her to undertake the duties of a governess.

This melancholy change will explain the

emotion which she displayed when the stranger innocently referred to her home.

Thoughts of the recent past rushed into her mind, and presented a vivid contrast to present circumstances.

A few days ago her mother was mistress of a happy home; now she was living alone in dismal solitude in a Northern town, waiting for the return of Alice, who was the sole prop of her declining years.

Just two days after the eventful visit to the academy, Alice went for a walk with several of the pupils to Central Park. While she was proceeding along one of the pathways bordering the drive, her attention was drawn to a "four-in-hand" which was moving slowly by. A number of people stopped to look at it, and exclamations of admiration were freely expressed by several of the bystanders on the beauty of the horses and the excellent finish and style of the equipage generally.

"Whose turn-out is that?" asked one of the bystanders, referring to this splendidly-appointed drag.

"Oh, that's Banker Woodville's! His son and heir, Mr. Jocelyn Woodville, is driving," replied another.

Alice raised her eyes to the box-seat of the drag, and saw the young stranger who had spoken to her in the academy.

A bevy of brilliantly-attired ladies were with him, but by his side sat the handsome girl whom Alice recognized as the same that had attracted her notice at the academy.

The two were evidently very happy and pleased, and Alice noted that he smiled upon his lovely companion, and that she responded to the smile with every appearance of cordial sympathy.

Alice moved quickly away, her eyes brimming with tears and her lips quivering with suppressed emotion. She was glad to get back to Miss Frost's again, where, in the privacy of her own room, she gave way unrestrainedly to her pent-up feelings.

Before retiring for the night she tenderly pressed the fragrant flower to her lips which she had received from the young stranger. Then she placed the precious token in a place of safety, meaning to keep it by her always.

She knew, of course, that the beautiful rose would soon die, and that its sweet perfume would pass away forever; but she also knew that it would be imperishably associated in her memory with the tender thought of one whom she could never forget.

On the next day she received the most unexpected news from her mother in the following letter:

"PINEWOOD, NEAR TROY, N. Y.

"MY DEAR CHILD:—

"A great and welcome change—as you will see from the above address—has taken place in our affairs. Arthur Templeton, my nephew, has most kindly offered me a home here; and I am already feeling the benefit of the change from that comfortable boarding-house where life was so dismal and dreary.

"He only heard of my sad position a short time since, as, in obedience to your dear father's dying wishes, I have been silent on the subject. Some good friend evidently informed him of our circumstances, and then he immediately took steps to bring me here.

"I may as well tell you at once that Arthur is very poor—that is, very poor for one whose property is among the finest in the State. It is heavily mortgaged, and the title-deeds are in the possession of a lawyer who advanced large sums on them to the late Mr. Templeton, your father's brother. Arthur is gradually paying off the heavy debt, but I fear that he has undertaken a task which may prove even too much for his patience and industry.

"We are obliged to live in a small way owing to these circumstances; but Arthur is so kind and attentive, that life is very pleasant under his roof. It will be my constant endeavor—as I am sure it will be yours—to do everything in my power to console and comfort him under his severe trials.

"I have written to Miss Frost on the subject of your immediate withdrawal from the seminary. Pray lose no time in leaving New York, as I am very anxious to see you again.

"Ever your affectionate mother,

"FLORENCE TEMPLETON.

"P. S.—Arthur sends his sincerest regards to you."

Two days after the receipt of this letter, Alice was on her way to join her mother, who awaited her coming so impatiently.

A new life was now before her; but she felt that whatever changes the future might bring, it could not obliterate the tender memory of the past.

CHAPTER II.

A PROUD MAN.

PINEWOOD, the old home of the Templeton family, was a fine old-fashioned-looking mansion of Gothic design, with a heavy curtain of ivy falling in dark green folds over its massive walls.

Spacious grounds surrounded the house, and although they were at the present time neither well kept up or highly cultivated, yet the place was noted for miles around for its picturesque loveliness and romantic situation.

A few words will suffice to explain the position in which Arthur Templeton found the estate when he succeeded to it on the death of his father, just eight years before.

The late Mr. Templeton had borrowed large sums of money, to speculate with, from a Mr. Murdock, a lawyer practicing in the neighboring town of Troy.

Arthur was under the impression that his father had repaid the greater part of this money, especially as no mention was made of it in the will, nor did his father speak of it as a liability when conferring with him on matters of business a few days before his death.

On entering into possession of the estate, however, he found that Mr. Murdock held two bonds for a sum of eighty thousand dollars, and that against this loan the lawyer held the title deeds of the Pinewood property.

Arthur was at the mercy of Mr. Murdock, for if the lawyer pressed for a settlement the property would have to be surrendered to him at the expiration of ten more years.

Thereupon Arthur Templeton at once agreed to hand over the revenues of the estate to the lawyer, with the exception of the house and land around it, and a wooded district of several hundred acres.

Then this able and energetic representative of one of the oldest Knickerbocker families in the State started a lumber-mill in the town of Troy, and worked as assiduously and pertinaciously as if he had been brought up to the business.

This step alone stamped Arthur Templeton as a man of rarely vigorous character, which he soon proved himself to be.

He retired altogether from the society of his former friends and acquaintances, deeming it unwise to hold intercourse with people who were much better off than himself, and with whom, therefore, he could not mix on terms of equality.

He was determined to devote his life to one object, viz., the saving of the family estates from the ravenous clutch of Mr. Murdock. Pleasure, friends, everything, in fact, which makes life bright and pleasant, especially for the young and ardent, he had resolved upon sacrificing for the purpose which we have just mentioned.

Eight years of incessant work and worry, for his business engagements entailed both, had told upon him in many ways.

His face bore the traces of trouble, and looked rather wan and pinched at times; but, nevertheless, it was a face that attracted admiration, for it was full of character and high-toned individuality.

His eyes were the most remarkable feature of his face. Large, dark orbs, charged with a sort of electric force which gave his glance a certain penetrating quality not always welcomed by those at whom leveled.

He had the strange power of fixing people, as it were, by a glance; they felt powerless under the quick, lightning-like flash of his splendid eyes.

Tall and lithe of build was Arthur Templeton, and with a frame that was well adapted to give effect to the nervous energy of his mind.

The arrival of his aunt, and more recently his cousin Alice, had a good effect on him. He felt that he was getting harsh, and crusty, and morose; and the society of women has a wonderfully softening and soothing effect under such circumstances.

He was already deeply attached to his aunt, and he thought that Alice was an agreeable girl, and liked her; but as yet he had not sufficient time to say whether she was worthy of any higher feeling of regard.

Mere good looks were thrown away on him; so that Alice's beauty, in his eyes, was nothing in her favor.

Such was Arthur Templeton of Pinewood, at the period in which we have become interested in his history.

Alice had now been nearly a fortnight under her cousin's roof, and during that period she had gone daily to a farm which was about a mile and a half from the house, for the purpose of acquiring a knowledge of butter-making and of other useful branches of dairy-farming.

Arthur was privately amused at this, though he could not help admiring the motive which prompted Alice to try and help him by looking after his interests at Pinewood.

He was about to leave the house one glorious July morning, on his usual visit to Troy, when Alice met him at the door. She was looking very radiant and happy, and he could not resist admiring the youthful freshness and beauty of her face as she raised her eyes to his and smiled with ingenuous cordiality.

"Are you going by the farm?" she asked, as she gently laid her hand upon his arm.

"Yes, Alice."

"Then I'll go with you if you don't mind, Arthur."

He willingly assented, and they started at once on their way.

"Well, how do you like life at Pinewood?" he asked, after they had been walking for a few minutes.

"I am very happy indeed, thanks to you, cousin Arthur," she replied, with tender sincerity.

"Don't you find it very dull and monotonous here, Alice? Come, speak candidly to me."

"I certainly do not find it either dull or monotonous. I have never enjoyed myself so much anywhere as I do here. And then mamma is so pleased. That alone would content me."

"But surely, like all girls, you desire a certain amount of variety; and there is no variety at Pinewood. A dance occasionally, picnics, garden-parties, with the usual complement of attractive and admiring young men; these are things which, I am sure, you must miss greatly."

"I assure you, Arthur, that I do not miss them. I have never been accustomed to much social gayety, and I have never felt the need of it."

"Well, well, it is a good thing to be able to reconcile ourselves to a humdrum mode of life when no other is possible. Perhaps one of these days," he added, cheerily, "we may be able to make Pinewood a brighter and happier place than it is now."

"For your sake, dear Arthur, I hope so. Not that mother and I find Pinewood at all gloomy."

She stopped abruptly, for his dark eyes were fixed upon her, and seemed to read her most secret thoughts.

"You are good-natured enough to try and conceal the truth from me."

Noticing her confusion he added, in a gentler tone:

"But there! We've had enough of the subject, Alice. Let us talk of something else."

For a few minutes she was silent. His glance had frightened her; it seemed to dart into her mind like an arrowy gleam of light.

How different, she thought, from the soft and tender radiance of the dark eyes which had looked so imploringly into hers on the occasion of her visit to the academy! Ah, she

would never, never forget the meaning conveyed by those tender glances!

"Do you walk into Troy every day, cousin?" she asked, when she had recovered from her confusion.

"Yes; every day."

"How many miles is it?"

"About five—ten miles there and back."

"Bless me! No wonder that you are tired in the evening, Arthur!" she said, in a tone of tender sympathy.

He looked at her gratefully, but said nothing.

"I think," she continued, in a strain of hopeful sympathy, "that we shall be very successful at home this year. I have been looking carefully into matters, and I have already made several improvements."

"Ah!" he exclaimed, as a smile passed over his haggard face.

"Oh, yes, indeed I have; and I mean to give my whole attention to the farm now! I'm so anxious to be of some use to you, cousin Arthur."

This little outburst of feeling touched him deeply. It suggested to his mind the possibility of nobler qualities in Alice than he had previously deemed her capable of possessing. Could such a girl be as wise as she was beautiful? He dismissed the thought, after a moment's reflection, as utterly impossible.

"But you must be careful not to overwork yourself, Alice," he said, after a short silence.

"Now you're laughing at me, Arthur," she replied, in a tone of disappointment.

"Laughing at you, Alice? Heaven forbid! I have not met with so many sympathizers in my troubles as to undervalue kindly expressions such as you have uttered."

There was no doubt of his sincerity, and she looked up at him now that she saw his eyes had lost their piercing look and were suffused with tenderness.

In a few minutes they reached the farm, and having looked through the place, and given instructions to Alice not to tire herself, Arthur bade her good-morning and resumed his journey.

On arriving at Troy, he found, much to his surprise, that Mr. Murdock had called to see him, and had left word that he would probably look in again in the course of the day.

He had a deep-rooted dislike to the lawyer, which, however, circumstances compelled him to conceal as much as possible.

Murdock was the only man that he really feared, and he feared him because he knew well that he was no match for the lawyer, whose ingenuity and cunning were indeed remarkable.

On hearing of the lawyer's visit, he was immediately beset with fears as to its object. The payments on account of the mortgage were made with unfailing regularity, therefore it could not have anything to do with that matter. What, then, was it?

His cogitations had proceeded thus far, when Murdock himself appeared.

The lawyer was a man of stout build, with a fat, ruddy face, heavy jaws, and a perfectly bald head. Save for a certain furtive twinkle which lurked in his eyes, which were small and green of hue, you would never have suspected the unbounded capacity for cheating which the man possessed.

Murdock was the confidential legal adviser of nearly all the wealthy residents in the neighborhood, which was ample proof of the ability with which he managed to impose on people. At the same time, he was a sound lawyer; and so long as he served them well, it was only natural that his clients should have a high opinion of him.

As he sat down now in Templeton's private office, and leisurely rubbed his bald head with a silk handkerchief, he presented an aspect of amiability which might have deceived anybody.

"Well, Mr. Murdock, what can I do for you?" inquired Templeton, in as friendly a voice as he could assume.

"Well, it's a small matter, and I have no doubt that, with your usual good sense, if you will allow me to say so, we shall soon arrange it."

The lawyer spoke in quite a soothing voice, which was usually very effective in lulling suspicion; but in this instance it failed to do so.

"What is it?" said Templeton, in his sharpest tones.

"You might remember that in your father's lifetime the right of way through a portion of the Templeton plantations was claimed by the then representative of the Vernon family, whose estate borders yours. Your father, whose adviser I then was, refused to acknowledge the claim; and after spending a lot of money in litigation, the suit was dropped, and the claim fell into abeyance. Now it is about to be revived by Miss Vernon, the present representative of the family; and as I am acting as her adviser, I thought that, under existing circumstances, if I first mentioned the matter to you, some friendly understanding might be arrived at."

"I will come to no friendly understanding on the subject, Mr. Murdock! I will not sacrifice any of those rights for which, as you know, I am paying a dear price!" replied Templeton, with indignant emphasis.

"I am sorry to hear that, for I should really like to see the business settled out of court," observed the lawyer, with apparent sincerity.

"No doubt, no doubt," replied Arthur, as he rose from his chair and moodily walked about the room.

Pausing in front of Murdock, who had been watching him closely with his small green eyes, as a cat might watch a mouse, he added:

"May I ask you, Mr. Murdock, if you approve of Miss Vernon's attempt to revive this dispute?"

"Personally—mind you, personally—I would much rather that she had not attempted to do so; but, of course, as her agent and adviser in legal matters, I must fulfill instructions, however painful."

"Could you not use your influence to dissuade her from proceeding with the matter?"

Mr. Murdock shook his head and replied:

"Not the least use, I can assure you; but"—and he looked up hopefully at Templeton—"if you will speak to her yourself on the subject—"

"What!" shouted the young man in a voice of anger.

"She might be willing, for the sake of old times," continued the lawyer, not heeding the interruption, "to let the matter drop."

"Miss Vernon is the last person in the world of whom I should ask a favor!" Then, in an altered tone of voice, he added: "Now we understand one another, Mr. Murdock. I'll not surrender my right. And tell your client that I mean to fight to the bitter end!"

"All right, Mr. Templeton—all right. I'm afraid that you'll regret your resolve one of these days. Even if you are successful, it will cost you a large sum."

Arthur was silent. The lawyer knew well that it was only by great diligence and hard work that he was able to meet his present liabilities, and a costly lawsuit must necessarily ruin him.

"Well, you are determined to fight?" he asked, with quite a cordial smile.

"Yes," simply replied Templeton.

"Then we'll open operations in a day or two by breaking down your fences—merely as a matter of form, you know—and then you can take proceedings against us, and we'll assert our claim in the ordinary course."

"Very well," simply replied Arthur.

The lawyer rose, bade Templeton good-morning in the most affable way, and then left him.

This intelligence was almost too trying for the brave heart of Arthur Templeton. After striving for eight years with incessant energy to release his patrimony from the grip of Murdock, he now saw that all his efforts would be

rendered fruitless by Miss Vernon's unneighborly conduct. To carry on an expensive lawsuit, and at the same time pay Murdock, was impossible. What was he to do? To give in to Miss Vernon would be to surrender, in part, that which it was the object of his life to preserve in its integrity—viz., the Pinewood property. And yet, if he tried to defend his rights, he would probably be beggared in a very short time.

As he reflected on the subject, his mind reverted to the happy past, when he lived on terms of tender sympathy with Sybil Vernon. And his thoughts were evidently of a painful nature, stirring up memories which filled his heart with a passion of regret; so that, brave and high-spirited man though he was, he trembled like a frightened child, and tears, the first he had shed since his father's death, came into his eyes and trickled down his harassed-looking face.

He remained at the office later than usual, and then started for Pinewood, which he did not reach until nearly ten o'clock.

"Oh, my dear Arthur, you do look ill!" exclaimed Alice, as she met him in the hall.

"It's nothing, Alice; I'm merely tired after the day. I'll go to my own room at once. Good-night." And then he looked into the parlor, where Mrs. Templeton was sitting, and bade her good-night also, and then retired to his own room.

"Oh, Sybil, Sybil!" he cried, as he flung himself into an easy-chair with a groan of despair. "Proud, haughty, unfeeling girl!" he continued, "to take such an ignoble advantage of my unhappy lot!"

And the night wore on, and still he sat there communing with his distraught soul; nor did he obtain the relief of sleep until the dawning light of another day had spread itself over the eastern skies.

CHAPTER III.

"WE MEET AGAIN."

On the following day, after a hurried breakfast, Arthur left the dining-room and retired to his study. The haggard and anxious expression of his face had caused deep concern to his aunt and cousin, but they had refrained from referring to it in his presence, fearing that any sympathetic inquiry even might have given him pain.

"I can see plainly that Arthur's mind is greatly disturbed," remarked Mrs. Templeton, in a low voice to her daughter.

She was a pale, amiable-looking woman, with blue eyes, and an abundance of hair which was almost perfectly white, and which she wore in neat folds under her mourning cap.

"I noticed it last night, mother," replied Alice, sadly. "I wish that it was in my power to be of some assistance to him."

"You can see, Alice, that he is not a man to ask others to share his troubles," continued the widow, reflectively.

"Yes, and I think that it is a pity that he should be so reserved when people are longing to comfort him."

"Apart from his business worries, I suspect that he has other troubles which he would naturally keep to himself."

"Ah!" exclaimed Alice, looking inquiringly into her mother's face.

"Your poor father, his uncle, told me that at one time it was expected that he would have gained the hand of one of the richest girls in this part of the State—a Miss Vernon, whose estate is in our immediate neighborhood. But the match, if ever it existed, was broken off, and Miss Vernon is about to become the wife of a young man, the son of a New York banker, I believe."

"Perhaps that has something to do with Arthur's unhappiness." And having said this, Alice became moodily silent.

Suddenly she arose from her chair and walked to the window, where she remained for a few minutes gazing meditatively at the scene outside. Then she turned, and approaching

her mother, fell upon her knees at the widow's feet.

"You will not be angry with me, dearest mother, for what I am going to say?"

"Angry with you, Alice!" exclaimed Mrs. Templeton, in a tone of surprise.

"No, I'm sure you won't. Well, it is this: I should like to earn my own living; to go out as a governess somewhere. Arthur is poor, and I am a burden upon him!" and she tenderly clasped her mother's white hand and kissed it affectionately.

"Nonsense, child! Are you not going to look after the interests of the farm?"

"Ah! no one knows better than Arthur that that was a childish plan of mine. He good-naturedly approved of it; but I think that he regards me as a silly girl for having thought of such a thing. No, mother, I must go to work in earnest if I would be of any use to you and to him."

"But, my dear child, I'm sure that Arthur would be deeply offended if you were to show such small appreciation of his kindness as to desire to leave Pinewood."

"Oh! I shouldn't say anything to him about it, mother. I could go away quietly, and you could explain matters to him afterward."

"Alice," said Mrs. Templeton, after a short silence, "I must have a little time to consider this proposal of yours. At present I am not prepared to come to any decision. Here is Arthur, dear!"

And Alice rose to her feet as her cousin entered the room.

"Now, Alice," he said, with an assumed cheerfulness of tone that did not impose upon her, "I'm about to start for Troy. Would you like to walk a part of the way with me?"

She gladly assented, and in a few minutes they left the house together.

"What a lovely morning!" she exclaimed, as they moved down the avenue under the leafy trees, through the branches of which the sunlight darted in brilliant rays.

On either side stretched away the extensive grounds, here and there dotted with clumps of trees or with patches of shrubs and great beds of coleus which flamed in the sunlight like masses of fire.

"Certainly Pinewood is a delightful spot," she added, while looking up into his face with inquiring tenderness.

"Yes, it is, Alice, if they'd only let us remain here," he replied, in a tone of bitterness.

After a moment's pause, she said, while gently touching his arm:

"Arthur, do you think that it is kind to treat us in this way?"

"What do you mean, Alice?" he replied, without looking at her.

"I mean that your silence on the subject of your fresh troubles is very painful, very—"

She hesitated and turned her head aside to hide her emotion.

"How on earth could you tell that I have met with fresh troubles?"

"I saw it by your face the moment that you entered the house last night."

"Then if you've found me out, I may as well confess that a new trial is in store for me, and I'll tell you all about it, if you promise faithfully not to mention the matter to your mother. She is getting on in years now, Alice, and the less she sees or hears of trouble the better."

This unexpected manifestation of confidence in her, coupled as it was with such tender sympathy for her mother, touched Alice deeply, and for a moment or two she could not answer him.

Regaining her composure with an effort, she said:

"It is very good of you, Arthur, to take me into your confidence, and I will be careful not to abuse it in any way."

In a few words he told her of the claim put forward by Miss Vernon, and explained that the legal proceeding would be very costly and might involve him in grave difficulties.

"Miss Vernon must be a very quarrelsome creature, Arthur," she remarked, when he had concluded.

"No; I can't say that she is. Sybil—I mean Miss Vernon—imagines, I suppose, that she is justified in claiming a right of way through our grounds, and is determined to prove her right."

"But surely she cannot know the price which you may have to pay on account of her determination?"

"Why should she trouble her head about that?" he inquired, looking at her with that swift glance which seemed to penetrate the innermost recesses of her mind.

Alice grew confused, and was afraid to look at him.

"Perhaps," he added, after a short pause, "you have heard that at one time I was smitten with Miss Vernon's charms?"

Alice bowed.

"It was a boyish dream merely, Alice, out of which I was rudely awakened. Miss Vernon is a proud and wealthy girl, and Arthur Templeton is a poor man."

And a forced smile played about his mouth as he said this.

"Not at all proud man, of course," remarked Alice, with a roguish laugh.

"Just proud enough, Alice, to preserve himself from suffering any humiliations at the hands of Sybil Vernon," he replied, in a voice of suppressed feeling.

They had passed the gates of the lodge, and were now well on the high-road toward Troy.

An embarrassing silence had followed Arthur's last remark, attributable mainly to Alice, who somehow or other felt that this confidential chat with her cousin had created an understanding between them, to which, at present, she certainly had no desire to give the least encouragement.

Her fears in this direction were enhanced when he said, in a voice which betrayed much feeling:

"It is a delightful change for me to have some one near to whom I can confide my troubles. Do you know, Alice, that there is not another person in the world, I believe, whose sympathy I would care to invite as I have invited yours?" And he glanced at her tell-tale face with great tenderness while speaking.

"Perhaps if you were not quite so reticent with others, Arthur, painful misunderstandings might be obviated—with Miss Vernon, for instance."

"I tell you, child," he said, emphatically, "that Miss Vernon is one of the proudest girls breathing, and would have spurned me as a coward and a sneak if I had disturbed her with stories of my trials and troubles!"

"Is she so selfish as not to feel for those who are suffering?"

"I would not like to say that, Alice."

"But if she knew that—"

"I know what you are about to say, Alice, and I must repeat, once and for all, that I would not for the world let Miss Vernon imagine that she had frightened me into submission. No; anything but that—anything but that!"

"It seems a pity that two people who might be good friends should be irrevocably alienated, when a few words of kindly explanation would probably clear up all misunderstandings between them."

"We should never have been good friends, Alice," he replied, with a sad smile. "However," he added, with forced gayety, "the past is dead and gone now, with all its hopes and fears!"

"Perhaps the future has much happiness in store for you, Arthur."

"We will hope for the best at any rate. Do you know, Alice," he continued, while looking at her tenderly, "that I fancy that we shall get on famously together—eh?"

"Yes, I hope so, I'm sure," she replied, not daring to raise her eyes to his.

"I will look to you now to give me strength and courage to face my difficulties."

"I'm afraid, Arthur, that I shall be of small assistance to you; but I will do my best—my very best."

"To know that you are anxious to help me, is very comforting. For the first time now for some years I am experiencing the delight of sympathetic intercourse. Ah, what a barren thing life is without sympathy!"

Then he stopped and pointed out to her a stately mansion, standing in the midst of extensive grounds.

"That is Miss Vernon's home. It is a beautiful place, and the Vernon property is one of the most valuable about here. The place is called Cherton Abbey."

They had not resumed their walk many moments when Alice noticed the figure of a young man who was coming toward them, preceded by several dogs, which were gambling about the road.

As they drew near, Alice thought that the appearance of this person was familiar to her, but before she had time to collect her thoughts on the subject, he stopped in front of them, and held his hand out to Arthur.

"Hallo, Templeton! I'm glad to see you!" he said, in a cordial tone.

Alice was nearly overcome.

The stranger of the academy now stood before her, but, fortunately, his eyes were fixed on Templeton, who, ignoring his outstretched hand, eyed him coldly.

"Mr. Woodville I wish you no harm, but—"

"Mr. Templeton," said the young man, indignantly, as the blood mounted into his face, "if you were alone I would make you answer for this insult!"

Then his eyes for the first time met Alice's, and he staggered back, evidently amazed.

"Come on, dear!" whispered Arthur, as he pushed past the young man and walked rapidly away. "That is Banker Woodville's eldest son, Jocelyn. I suppose he is at the bottom of the proceedings against me."

"Why should he be?" inquired Alice, in a low voice.

"Because he is about to become the husband of Miss Vernon."

Alice clutched her cousin for support. Then she grew deadly pale, and nearly fainted in his arms.

"Are you better?" he inquired, when she had recovered.

"Yes, Arthur, I'm all right again," she replied, with a sad smile.

He wished to accompany her back to Pinewood, to which she was about to return; but she assured him that there was no necessity for this, as she had quite recovered her strength again.

She explained that the attack was due to the excessive heat, and was in no way attributable to anything else.

This satisfied him, and tenderly bidding her "good-morning," he resumed his walk toward Troy, while she slowly retraced her steps.

Jocelyn had disappeared from the road, and had probably entered the grounds of Cherton Abbey.

Alice would not have moved forward if he had been in her way. She was anxious above all things to avoid him for the future. His conduct toward her had been reprehensible in the highest degree, and had she been imposed upon to any serious extent by his perfidious attentions, it would probably have brought misery upon her, compared to which her present suffering was mere child's play.

She could not help feeling angry with herself for having listened to him when he addressed her at the academy, and for having then thought that he was a sincere and truthful man.

It was a rude rebuff to her pride to know that her feelings had been trifled with by this young man, and that he had regarded her merely in the light of a giddy girl who was

willing to pay heed to the tender compliments of a fashionable stranger.

Thus her mind now dwelt upon this subject—alternately blaming herself and condemning the other; and yet the thought of what might have been had he answered to her first impression occasionally darted through her mind, and revived for a moment the sweet dreams which had followed the interview in New York.

She was startled from her reverie by the sudden barking of dogs in one of the fields bordering the road; and in another minute Jocelyn bounded over the hedge and stood before her.

He raised his hat and bowed.

She brushed past him with hasty step.

In a moment he was by her side, looking with tender inquiry into her face.

"Don't you remember me?" he asked.

She stopped and confronted him.

"Yes, I do; but I'm surprised that you should take advantage of my present defenseless position to force yourself upon me! If you dare to speak to me again, my cousin, Arthur Templeton, shall hear of it!"

"You wrong me cruelly, Miss Templeton, for that, I presume, is your name. I have never ceased to think of our meeting in New York, and to cherish the hope that we would meet again. Do you believe me?"

"No; I do not."

"Why should you doubt my word now? You told me in New York that you believed me to be a truthful man. What have I since done to forfeit your confidence?"

"You are a coward to remind me of the folly of which I was guilty when I permitted you to speak to me in New York!"

"By Heaven, you wrong me cruelly!" he cried out, in great distress. "I am not a coward, nor yet a liar!"

"That will do, Mr. Woodville!" said Alice, with haughty abruptness. "If you have a spark of gentlemanly feeling left, you will cease to molest me!"

He turned from her with a hasty movement, and she saw him placing his hands to his face.

She walked swiftly forward, and soon reached Pinewood, feeling sick at heart after this stormy interview.

CHAPTER IV.

A BETROTHAL OF CONVENIENCE.

It was a bright, sunny afternoon in the early days of August, and Mrs. Woodville and her son were seated in the drawing-room of the banker's palatial summer residence, chatting on the subject of the latter's engagement with Sybil Vernon.

Mrs. Woodville—with whose appearance the reader is already familiar—was evidently not in the best of tempers, and her voice was sharp and decisive as she now addressed her son.

"It seems in the last degree foolish of you, Jocelyn, to give us both so much annoyance over this matter. Surely, your own good sense ought to teach you by this time that we are not likely to give way to your wishes when they are opposed to the interests and honor of the family."

Jocelyn looked anxious and distressed, and it was evident that his mother's strictures were causing him pain.

"But you seem to forget altogether that Sybil's wishes have to be consulted, and—"

"Sybil's wishes are in perfect accord with ours," interrupted his mother, abruptly.

"Are you perfectly sure of that?"

"Perfectly sure!"

"Well, I suppose, then, I must— Oh, it's very hard, mother, to be treated like this!" he exclaimed, as he rose from his chair and walked moodily about the room.

"Hard! Is it, then, such a painful thing to become the husband of one of the wealthiest and most beautiful girls in the State?"

"It is a painful thing, if our feelings are not in harmony."

"Don't you care for Sybil, then?" she inquired, glancing at him keenly.

"Certainly, she is very dear to me as an old friend and companion!"

"If she is very dear to you now, even in that sense, rely upon it that love of the tenderest kind will spring up between you when you are married."

Mrs. Woodville had scarcely finished speaking when her husband entered the room.

"I am speaking to Jocelyn about Sybil Vernon," she added, turning to him.

"The very subject upon which I desire to have a few words with him. Come, Jocelyn, is the marriage to take place this month or next, eh?"

Banker Woodville was a man who rarely failed to have his own way with people. Proud, haughty and arbitrary, he could not tolerate opposition to his wishes from anybody; he seemed to think that it was the duty of human creatures generally to submit to him, and to do so with good grace, too, if they would escape incurring his enmity and anger.

"I have already explained that I am prepared to fulfill my promise—that is, if Sybil Vernon is agreeable. I can't very well marry her without her consent," replied his son, whose mood had changed to an attitude of sullen defiance.

"She has never placed any difficulties in the way, to my knowledge. Sybil has never failed to obey the wishes of her old guardian. I dare say she has a will of her own, but she has never been guilty of the folly of opposing it to mine," said Mr. Woodville, pompously.

"It would be a good thing if her example were followed by your son, Woodville," observed his wife, with a reproving glance at their son, who was standing in the shadow of a bay-window, moodily contemplating the sunny scene outside.

"I would have you know, Jocelyn, once and for all, that my wishes in this matter must govern your conduct. I will put down any opposition with unrelenting severity."

And the banker grew very red in the face when he said this, and coughed several times, as if his temper was choking him.

"I think, with all respect," said Jocelyn, as he turned and faced his parents, "that you are both very unreasonable."

"Unreasonable!" exclaimed his father, angrily. "How dare you tell us anything of the kind, sir—I say, how dare you?"

And he fretted and fumed about the room in a state of great excitement.

"Well, all I can say is this—that within a reasonable time, if nothing unforeseen happens, I will be prepared to give effect to your wishes."

He was calm and firm, and had evidently weighed his words carefully.

"Jocelyn, I'll tell you what I shall do if you continue to defy me—"

"I'm not defying you," interpolated his son.

"Yes, you are, sir! Don't contradict me! I'll"—and the banker grew very impressive now—"deprive you of your present liberal allowance, sell the yacht and the racing stud, and compel you to live in strict retirement until you come to your senses."

"You can do as you please," replied the other, shrugging his shoulders with expressive indifference.

At this moment a servant entered the room and announced, "Miss Vernon."

"I'm glad to see you, my dear!" said Mrs. Woodville, embracing the heiress, whose dark and imperious beauty was seen to perfection to-day in a light cream-tinted costume, and with a bunch of brilliant flowers in her bosom.

Having exchanged greetings with the family she said, "What on earth is the meaning of all this fuss about Mr. Templeton's land and my right of way through it?"

And she looks at Mr. Woodville for an answer.

"Ah!" he replied, with an engaging smile, having regained his composure, "I'm glad you have mentioned the matter, Sybil. Fact is—"

acting on your behalf—I instructed Murdock to take proceedings in vindication of your right, which had been in abeyance quite long enough. But, if you remember, I spoke on the subject to you some time ago, and we agreed upon this step."

"Yes, you did; but I didn't quite understand the question, my dear sir. It seems to me to be a questionable proceeding, seeing that Mr. Templeton is in such difficulties already. I wouldn't like our neighbors to think that I was taking advantage of his present position to crush him, as it were."

She tried to smile, but it was a faint effort, and died away in a nervous quivering of the lips.

"My dear Sybil, don't distress yourself as to the nature of these proceedings. It is a perfectly legitimate endeavor to recover rights appertaining to the Vernon property, which were unjustly—I might say dishonestly—appropriated by the Templetons in times gone by."

The banker's mind was clearly made up on the subject, and it was hopeless to expect any amount of reasoning could effect a change in his opinion.

Miss Vernon, however, was evidently determined to give expression to her views, and she resumed the subject after a moment's silence.

"I quite agree with you, Mr. Woodville, that we should stand up for our rights; but, in this instance, don't you think that it would only be fair to wait until Mr. Templeton is in a position to defend himself?"

"A position to defend himself?" repeated the other. "You little know Arthur Templeton, or you wouldn't say that! Why, when Murdock offered to settle the matter in a friendly way, he refused the offer in the most positive terms, and defied us!"

"He is very proud, I know," observed Sybil, in a low voice.

"Yes, he is; and it's time some one in the neighborhood undertook the task of humbling his pride! In some respects, indeed, he has fallen very low, and has brought disgrace on an honored name!"

"Has he?" said Miss Vernon, in a tone of indignant inquiry.

"Why, don't you know that he has become a workingman—a lumber dealer, in fact?"

"Yes, I know that in his honest efforts to redeem his property he has become a workingman. Surely there is nothing to be ashamed of in that?" And, with a smile, she looks at Mr. Woodville's grave face.

"He would have acted in a far more dignified manner if he had relinquished his property, and retired to some secluded corner of the world, where his poverty would be unobserved. To make a parade of his difficulties, and to bring discredit on the set to which he belongs by becoming a common day-laborer, is a deplorable instance of degeneracy."

"Undoubtedly!" chimed in his wife, with emphatic suavity.

"What is society coming to if its members cannot act with greater dignity under their misfortunes? I say, what is society coming to?" continued the earl with impressive gravity.

"To its senses, I suppose!" quietly observed Miss Vernon.

"Sybil, that last remark of yours savors of plebeianism!" said the banker with awful solemnity.

"I must say, that I'm inclined to agree with Sybil about this right-of-way business," remarked Jocelyn, joining in the conversation for the first time.

"It's my duty to see after Sybil's interests, not yours. It will be your duty to do so ere long, I hope."

This retort silenced Jocelyn, and the subject was then dropped.

In the course of half an hour Miss Vernon left the Woodvilles' residence—The Towers—accompanied by Jocelyn.

For a little time they walked on in silence, both experiencing a sensation of embarrassment, which was a novel feeling to grow up

between them after a close companionship of several years.

They were both keenly conscious of each other's thoughts at the moment, and both knew well that they were on the verge of a long-deferred understanding.

"Sybil, I have something very important to say to you," remarked the young man in a nervous voice. "Can you guess what it is?" he added, looking inquiringly at her.

"No, Jocelyn," she replied, with a tell-tale blush.

He stopped; and they both stood facing one another under the shelter of a sturdy, gnarled oak tree.

"Sybil,"—he paused, and held his hand toward her—"Sybil, best and truest of girls, will you be my wife?"

She gently clasped his hand in hers, and said:

"Jocelyn, must we, then, cease to be friends?"

"We must cease to be friends, dearest, only to become lovers."

He bent toward her, and their lips met in a kiss of mutual tenderness; and then they drew apart, and slowly resumed their walk.

"The old people were getting so disagreeable with me that I could not put off asking you any longer. I know very well that you are making a great sacrifice, but what could I do? I spared you as long as I could."

"Yes; I know that your parents have suffered a good deal of anxiety, Jocelyn, about our intentions, and for their sakes I am glad that you have spoken."

"My father wishes the marriage to take place in the course of a month or two. Will that suit you?"

"Yes," she replied, simply. "Have you seen Arthur Templeton's cousin? I'm told that she is very beautiful," she added, after a pause.

"Ye—yes," gasped Jocelyn, with guilty hesitancy.

"Where have you seen her?" she asked, while watching him narrowly.

"Oh! I saw her with Templeton on the Troy road a little time back."

"Were you introduced to her?"

"Dear me, no, Sybil! Templeton behaved like a bear to me on that very occasion, and if I can get an opportunity of paying him back in his own coin, I shall do so."

"I'm surprised to hear that Templeton has been rude to you, seeing that you have been such good friends. But, Jocelyn, if we consider the man's troubles, we must pity him, and make allowances for his displays of temper."

"That's all very well, Sybil; but a man's troubles do not justify him in insulting an old friend with wanton cruelty."

"No; certainly not. But Templeton's pride spoils him; at least, it is the great blemish of his character. And yet I, for one, cannot help admiring the stern integrity of the man which enables him to dispense with friends and to defy the great social forces of which your father is our most influential exponent."

"I'll certainly tell the governor that you have been laughing at him!" he said, with a good-humored smile.

She tapped him playfully on the arm with her parasol, and then said, laughingly:

"I suppose you annoyed Templeton by making eyes at his pretty cousin?"

"Not at all. I simply offered him my hand, and he refused it. He will never have the opportunity of doing so again!" remarked the young man bitterly.

"Perhaps he is sorry now, Jocelyn."

"You seem very anxious to find excuses for him, Sybil!" he remarked, in an injured tone.

She made no reply, but a sad smile flitted over her face, and a look of tender sorrow came into her dark eyes.

They had now entered the grounds of Cherton Abbey, and were walking, in silence, in the deep shadow of an extensive plantation of firs, which bordered the confines of Arthur Templeton's property.

Suddenly a loud crashing noise attracted their attention, which was almost immediately followed by voices raised in angry dispute.

In another moment they came upon a group of men, who were struggling violently near the palings which ran between Miss Vernon's and Arthur Templeton's grounds.

One man, whom they could not recognize at the moment, was striving to repel several opponents, and the courage and strength he displayed excited at once the sympathy and admiration of Sybil and her companion.

Before they had time to move forward, his gallant fellow was felled by a cruel blow, and a groan of pain broke from him as he went with a dull thud to the ground.

They rushed forward. Sybil bent over the prostrate man.

"Good heavens!" she shrieked; "it's Arthur!—Arthur!"

And then she gently raised his head into her lap, and tried to check the blood which was flowing from a wound in his face.

The men present explained that they had had instructions to remove the palings, and that Mr. Templeton resisted them, and by his manner and bearing compelled them to use force to effect their purpose.

Jocelyn ordered them away, and then joined Sybil, whose efforts to restore Arthur Templeton to consciousness were now rewarded with success.

"Is that you, Alice dear?" he said, looking in a dazed way at Sybil.

"No, Arthur, it is your old playmate and companion, Sybil Vernon."

He struggled to rise, and after a moment or two succeeded.

"Will you not allow me to see you home, Mr. Templeton?" said Jocelyn, in a kindly voice.

At this moment Alice Templeton appeared on the scene, walking meditatively into their midst from the shadowy recesses of the wood.

"Alice, take me home," cried out Arthur to her, in a faint voice.

In a moment she was at his side.

Sybil's tears were flowing, but she could not speak.

Leaning upon Alice heavily, Arthur Templeton moved slowly away, without taking the least notice of Sybil and her companion.

"That right-of-way business has commenced badly, Sybil," observed Jocelyn, in a sympathetic voice.

"I tell you, Jocelyn, that I would rather have lost half my property than that Arthur Templeton should have been injured!" she said, in a voice of passionate indignation.

"Though I don't like him, I am sorry for him."

"What can your sorrow be to mine?" she continued, wildly. "Oh! I am the most unhappy girl in the world!"

"Take my arm, Sybil; we are near the Abbey."

"Leave me, and at once, Jocelyn," she said, rejecting his proffered assistance.

"Perhaps I'd better. I'll see you in the morning, when you are calmer. Good-night, Sybil!"

"Good-night!"

And then he left her; and when she found herself alone she sobbed out in passionate accents:

"Oh, my darling Arthur! how my heart clings to you still, in spite of all unkindness!"

And mourning thus over tender memories, she returned to the Abbey, and spent the night in tears.

CHAPTER V.

PLAYING FOR HIGH STAKES.

EVENTS were progressing in the order anticipated by that very deep and far-seeing individual, Samuel Murdock.

The physical assertion of his rights attempted by Arthur Templeton, and the immediate consequences thereof, as described in the previous chapter, had excited the sympathy of Miss Vernon, and she expressed anxiety to with-

draw the claim which was being urged on her behalf.

But Arthur Templeton, ignoring this conciliatory step, had placed the matter in the hands of his lawyer, and had peremptorily refused now to come to terms with Mr. Murdock's client, determinedly stating that it was his purpose to fight the matter out, and to prove to Miss Vernon and her advisers that he was right and that they were wrong.

Murdock knew well that Arthur Templeton would act in this rash way, and that his proud spirit would urge him to court destruction rather than accept a favor at the hands of Miss Vernon. Thus acting through Mr. Woodville, who was always willing to "put people down," Murdock managed to entangle his victim in a costly lawsuit, the preliminary expenses of which Arthur Templeton would not be able to meet unless the lawyer agreed to relieve him for a time from the heavy payments due on account of the Pinewood mortgage, and this Murdock had determined not to do.

He now saw the possibility of realizing one of the many sordid and dishonest dreams of his avaricious life. To become the sole owner of the Pinewood estates; to live in the ancestral home of the Templeton family, and to enjoy the distinction and dignity which such a position would confer upon him, was the great object at which he now aimed.

At the same time he was anxious to effect his purpose without creating any impression among his neighbors of undue harshness toward Arthur Templeton.

He wished to pose as a conscientious man, into whose hands a fine property had fallen in a perfectly legal and fair way. He valued the good opinion of the people of Troy and elsewhere, and he was determined to keep it if possible.

Among other things which he had done in the past in order to cultivate the good opinion of his fellow-creatures, this circumstance stands out pre-eminently.

When Arthur Templeton dismissed the large staff of servants which had been attached to Pinewood during his father's lifetime, surprise was expressed that he had not retained the services of Miss Eldred, the housekeeper, who had lived with the family for many years. Then it was announced that Mr. Murdock had most generously agreed to give Miss Eldred the post of housekeeper in his house, and in due course the lady entered upon her duties, and was still in his service. By such acts of consideration the lawyer had established a reputation for fine feeling and philanthropy among the people of Troy and its neighborhood.

Two weeks had elapsed since Arthur Templeton's mishap, and Mr. Murdock was seated in his private office, poring over legal papers, when the tenant of Pinewood was announced.

With a hasty, if not guilty, movement, the lawyer locked the papers in a safe, and then turned to receive his visitor.

Templeton looked as pale and haggard as usual, and a scar on his right cheek—the result of the encounter in the fir grove—added materially to his rather woe-begone appearance.

The lawyer greeted him with the greatest urbanity, and inquired after his health in a manner betokening much anxiety on the subject.

Paying but little heed to these civilities, Templeton said, in his sharp, staccato tones, "I have a matter of business to discuss with you, Mr. Murdock, of the utmost importance. Can you spare me half an hour?"

"An hour if you like, Mr. Templeton," cried out the lawyer, effusively.

"I find," resumed the visitor, after a moment's pause, "that it will be impossible for me to pay you the full amount on account of the Pinewood debt for some little time to come. You will receive a considerable installment, of course, and I shall be willing to pay a fair rate of interest on the balances falling due, but—"

"Hold, Mr. Templeton!" said Murdock, sharply. "You may spare yourself the trouble

of going into particulars. I can take no installments. Your agreement with me is to hand me the revenues of the estate until the amount due by your late father has been liquidated, and I cannot consent to any departure from that agreement. In fact, it's not in my power to do so. I had to borrow a considerable sum in order to meet your father's requirements, and I am still responsible for the amount."

"Yes; but this action—" commenced Templeton.

"Has nothing whatever to do with me as far as *your* interests are concerned. I tried to effect a friendly understanding between you and my client, but without success. Now, the law must take its course; unless indeed you are willing to take advantage of Miss Vernon's sympathetic advances," said the lawyer, with an ill concealed sneer.

"No; I'd rather sacrifice everything than be under an obligation to Miss Vernon—or to anybody else, for that matter," exclaimed the young man, haughtily.

"I begin to think that you wish to make an exception in my favor," remarked Murdock, in a mocking voice.

"Not a bit of it. It's purely a matter of business. I'll pay you any fair sum for interest in consideration of your agreeing to my proposal."

"And I most emphatically refuse to depart from the original agreement."

"Is that your final decision?" asked Templeton, as he rose from his chair, and looked at the lawyer with that keen, incisive glance which few could face.

"My final decision," repeated Murdock, in a low but firm voice.

Templeton moved to the end of the room, and with his back turned to Murdock, remained silent for a few minutes, looking out of a window that opened upon a beautiful old garden.

When he turned and again confronted the lawyer, his face had undergone a startling change.

An ashy pallor covered it, and an expression of passionate sorrow filled his eyes, which but a few minutes back were gleaming with suppressed anger.

Murdock was alarmed, and rose from his chair.

"I'm very sorry to see that this matter has put you out so much. Let me fetch you a glass of wine," said the lawyer, going toward the door.

"No, thank you."

After a moment's pause he added, "Under the circumstances, I cannot see my way to carry through the work that I had undertaken. I will not admit Miss Vernon's claim, nor would I consent to her withdrawal from the action, if you had accepted my proposal. As it is, I must retire from the fight."

Then pausing, he added, in a voice that trembled with emotion, "When the necessary formalities have been gone through, I shall be prepared to hand you over possession of Pinewood!"

With a bow, he left the office, giving the lawyer no time to say anything further on the subject.

When he reached the outer door leading to the street, he was met by his old housekeeper, Miss Eldred.

"Don't be down-hearted, Mr. Arthur," she said, in a cautious tone.

"I have lost Pinewood, after all," he replied. "I thought that I should have been able to offer you your old place again; but—"

He stopped, shook his head, and sighed heavily.

"Pinewood is not lost—remember that!" remarked the housekeeper, mysteriously, and then, with an affectionate smile, vanished into an adjoining room.

Templeton left the lawyer's house, his mind wholly occupied with the thought of his great loss.

Miss Eldred's words had made no impression upon him.

He was too much occupied with grim and tragic realities to heed the vague and indefinite expressions of a fine old woman, who had never faltered in her loyalty to the house of Templeton.

Meanwhile, Murdock was congratulating himself on the success which had attended his schemes.

He had not anticipated such a prompt surrender on the part of Templeton, who was usually credited with a tenacity of purpose wholly at variance with such conduct.

Miss Vernon and Banker Woodville would be regarded by the public as the real persecutors of Arthur Templeton, and this would preserve the lawyer from many disagreeable consequences which might otherwise have attended his acquisition of the Pinewood property.

In the course of a few days it became known in Troy that Mr. Templeton was about to leave the Eastern States, and that his property would pass into the hands of Mr. Murdock.

It was also rumored that the lawyer had for years behaved in the most considerate manner toward Arthur Templeton.

Four days had elapsed since Templeton's visit, and Mr. Murdock was lazily enjoying an after-dinner cigar in his snug smoking-room, when the evening post arrived.

Having glanced at one of the envelopes, he hastily tore it open, abstracted the letter with a sort of feverish energy, and read the contents. In another moment he was out of the room, hastily packing a few things in a valise.

A few hurried words to Miss Eldred, a rush to the station, and he managed to catch the night express for New York.

As he sat alone in a Pullman compartment, he looked the very picture of a guilty man.

And on and on through the night, with meteoric flash, the express thundered on its way to the metropolis.

In a corner of the seat he sat, pale but collected now.

The lawyer was not a man to give way for any length of time to a shock such as he had received. On the contrary, he soon recovered from its effects, and resumed his plans with greater determination and energy.

Murdock was a born villain, with the mind to conceive daring and ambitious schemes, and with the strength of will and courage to execute them.

Woe betide those who tried to thwart or overthrow him.

CHAPTER VI.

A FIERY ORDEAL.

THE momentous step taken by Templeton, involving, as it did, the sacrifice of that great object for which he had worked with such self-sacrifice energy and pertinacity, was not taken without due consideration of the many urgent circumstances by which he was now surrounded.

If he had been alone, he would have defended his rights at any cost; but with his aunt and cousin to provide for, he felt that he would not be justified in risking the loss of everything.

By relinquishing the property to Murdock now, and dropping all legal proceedings, he would be able to preserve about twenty thousand dollars for himself, and this was little enough with which to face the world under existing circumstances.

He attributed these troubles to Miss Vernon, believing that it was her purpose to ruin him completely, if possible.

She must have been well aware of his circumstances, he thought, and purposely raised the "right-of-way" question in order to involve him in legal difficulties, out of which he would not be able to extricate himself.

He regarded the offer which she had made to withdraw her claim as a mere ruse, so contrived as to place him under an obligation to her. And he was fixed in his resolve not to accept a favor at her hands under any circumstances.

Now, it was a strange thing that if anybody else had attempted to attribute these sinister motives to Sybil Vernon, he would have been the first to defend her character.

When Alice, for instance, spoke disparagingly of her some little time ago, he did his best to shield her from any blame in connection with the proceedings threatened on her behalf.

The explanation of this inconsistency was to be found in the fact of his deep and abiding love for Sybil.

Yes; nothing that she could do—and she had done much, in his belief—to cause him pain and misery, would in the least way affect his love for her.

However, he would bear his secret with him to the grave, and she should never know how faithfully he had loved her.

His purpose now was to leave Troy as soon as possible, and to go West, where he could purchase land at a cheap rate, and begin farming on a small capital. Of course Mrs. Templeton and Alice would accompany him.

As yet he had not told them of the great change which had taken place in his affairs; but now he was about to speak to Alice on that and on another subject of no less moment.

Alice's anxiety to leave Pinewood, in order to obtain a situation and earn her own living, was now known to him. Her mother informed him of it, stating that Alice was so urgent in her desire to take this step, that they would find it difficult to oppose her wishes.

Templeton could not but admire the spirit which prompted the girl to act in this way; indeed, it quite transformed Alice in his eyes, making her appear a creature endowed with qualities of the highest and noblest kind.

"She would make a good wife for a struggling man," he said to Mrs. Templeton, when she told him of her daughter's anxiety to obtain a situation; and these words filled the widow's heart with delight.

It was late in the afternoon of an August day when he found an opportunity of speaking freely to Alice. Since the morning walk already described, when they met Jocelyn, she had managed somehow to defeat his purpose of having a serious conversation with her. He met her on her return from the Home Farm, which was still visited daily in her desire to make good use of her time.

"So I've caught you at last!" he said, with a frank smile, as he stood before her, and sought to read the secret which he knew well lurked in the depth of her blue eyes.

"Yes, Arthur; and I have caught you!" she replied, with a timid smile, as she bent her eyes to the ground and blushed.

"Alice, why have you avoided me lately?" he inquired after a moment's notice, as they walked slowly, side by side, toward a densely-wooded portion of the park.

She made no reply, but her blush deepened, and her bosom rose and fell with a tremulous motion.

"Perhaps you have heard the news at the Home Farm?"

She stopped suddenly, and raised her eyes to his.

"Yes, I have, Arthur. What does it mean?"

"It means that we shall have to leave Pinewood, Alice. Yes, dear; fate has not favored my designs, and the principal aims of my life have been defeated!"

It was the first time that Alice had seen him betray such symptoms of emotion as were now visible in his countenance, and as she saw him almost unmanned by his feelings, the tears rose to her eyes in responsive sympathy.

"I need not tell you, Arthur, how deeply I feel for you!" she said, in a low, sad voice.

"No, you need not, Alice. I am well aware of your kindly sympathy for me; and I know, too, of your generous anxiety to give practical effect to that sympathy."

She started.

"You have no cause to be ashamed, Alice,"

he continued, noticing her confusion; "but you most assuredly have cause to feel well satisfied with yourself. I am proud of you, dear, for you are a good and brave girl!"

"Pray don't refer to this subject again!" she cried out imploringly; "mother promised to keep the matter to herself!"

"Why should you not consult me as to your wishes, Alice?" he asked, as they resumed her walk.

"Oh, I knew that you had many things to think about, Arthur, and—and besides—"

"Besides, what?" he interpolated.

"I thought perhaps that you might have felt offended, seeing that you were doing everything in your power to make me happy at Pinewood."

"And have failed to make you happy!" he observed, sadly.

"No, indeed, Arthur—no, indeed! I am very happy here; but I feel that, under existing circumstances, I have no right to lead an idle life."

"Well, Alice, now you can help me in earnest. I look to you for assistance, when all the world is against me. Will you give it to me?"

"Yes, with a willing heart, Arthur!" she replied, with a cordial sympathy.

Then in a few words, he told her of the exact position of affairs, and of his resolve to leave New York and settle in Dakota. No word escaped from him in condemnation of Sybil Vernon's conduct.

"Now," he continued, "it is my purpose, as you know, to provide for you and your mother under any circumstances. But Alice—" He paused, for she had turned, and was now looking at him in a frightened way. "I'm afraid that what I am about to say will not be welcome to you," he added, observing the expression of her eyes, and reading the meaning thereof with intuitive readiness.

She murmured a few words, but in such a low tone that he could not hear her.

"Alice," he resumed, "if we have to face the world together, why not face it as man and wife? You may rely upon me to be a tender and a faithful husband. Well?" and he bent over to catch her reply.

"It is very good of you to make me such a generous offer," she said, in a low voice, but not daring to lift her face to his inquiring eyes.

"It is certainly not a generous offer, Alice, under existing conditions, but it is the best that I can afford to make," and an expression of pain passed over his face as he said this.

She was silent for a moment or two, and then, in a more composed voice, said: "Arthur, confess it—you do not love me!"

"You are very, very dear to me, Alice, and I mean to devote my life to you now," he replied, evasively.

"Yes; but you are doing violence to your feelings in asking me to become your wife."

"No, Alice; indeed I am not! I—"

He hesitated and bent his eyes to the ground.

"I do not wish to cause you pain, Arthur, but surely it is better that we should understand one another now than that we should postpone explanations until it would be too late to remedy mistakes."

"I have already told you the story of my disappointment, and I have not concealed from you the lasting effects of that disappointment upon me."

"And when you told me, I thought, and I think still, that it was a great pity that you should have fallen out with Miss Vernon."

"As that lady is now about to become the wife of Jocelyn Woodville, I think that it would be better for all our sakes to make no further reference to her"—and a slight frown clouded his face for an instant.

"You are not angry with me, Arthur?" she said, anxiously, as she raised her eyes to his with appealing tenderness. "Indeed, I am not ungrateful to you for all your kindness to my mother and myself!" she added, feelingly.

They were now walking in the somber shade of the trees.

The sun was slowly sinking behind the hori-

zon, and the western skies were ablaze with the golden glories of the declining orb.

The approach of evening was heralded by a chill wind, which swept in rustling murmurs through the innumerable leaves.

The birds were almost silent; only an occasional chirrup came from the feathered songsters now, as they brooded in loving groups amid the leafy recesses of the trees.

Overhead, a straggling flock of crows winged their homeward flight, cawing hoarsely, as they sped swiftly on their way; but in a moment they were gone, and the silence of evening was unbroken.

Templeton had been walking on slowly for the last few minutes, in silent commune with his own thoughts.

He turned and looked at Alice, who was in tears.

"My dear girl," he cried out, as he gently placed his hand upon her arm, "do not distress yourself over this proposal of mine! If you cannot accept me as a husband, let me be a brother to you!"

"No, no, no!" she sobbed; "I am not indifferent to your tender regard for me—do not imagine that! I know that you are thinking only of my happiness, not of your own!"

He stopped and took her hands in his, and they stood facing one another in silence. For a second she tried to respond to his searching gaze, and then bent her eyes to the ground.

Releasing her hands, he said, in a tone of playful tenderness, "Alice, I shall regard your words as an acceptance of my suit; but I fancy that at the moment it would not be agreeable to you that I should require any more explicit declaration on the subject. Take my arm, dearest. It is getting late, and the mother will be waiting for us."

And leaning upon his arm, she returned to the house, feeling very miserable and unhappy.

Poor thing! she was still pining and fretting over a memory which was dearer to her than anything in life, and that memory was inseparably associated with a faded rose.

For several days Arthur was occupied in making arrangements for his departure from Pinewood.

It was his purpose to use the utmost expedition in carrying out his plans; indeed, above all things, he was anxious now to relinquish the cares and responsibilities which had weighed upon his life for the last eight years with such harassing effect.

Murdock had not yet returned to Troy; but he had written a letter to Arthur of a very obliging nature, which materially helped the latter in completing his plans.

One thing alone now remained to be settled.

Alice had not as yet given him an opportunity of coming to a final understanding with her on the subject of their marriage, and she persistently eluded his attempts to close the matter.

He had decided not to be unduly urgent with her, and to postpone their marriage if necessary until they had left Pinewood.

All these things worried him a good deal, and so aggravated the normal activity of his mind that his general health suffered in consequence.

It was a dark and chilly night, when, unable to bear the stillness and confinement of his room, he left the house, feeling that he could only obtain relief from the feverish anxieties which oppressed him in the freedom of the open air.

Heavy clouds swept in somber procession over the face of heaven; for the wind was high, and sobbed and souged with weird mournfulness amid the swaying branches of the trees.

Intermittently the moon's rays shone through the vaporous canopy overhead, touching the fields and the trees with silvery radiance for a moment, and then again relinquishing them to the darkness of night. He walked slowly down the avenue, grateful to the rushing wind which soothed the feverish throbbing of his temples.

His mind for the last few days had been reverting with insistent longing to the days of his intimacy with Sybil Vernon.

All her dainty little ways, her outbursts of temper and tenderness, her girlish love for him, and the many kindnesses which were exchanged between them, now came back to his mind and filled his eyes with tears. Passing out through the entrance-gates, he gained the high-road and moved slowly forward, his mind vainly seeking to struggle against the flood of tender thoughts which beset him. Suddenly a strange crimson shade seemed to spread over the black sky, and was faintly reflected in the somber pools of water which recent rains had left on the road. He watched the curious phenomenon; the shade was spreading, and as it spread, its hue became deeper and deeper. Soon a great expanse of sky was gleaming with a fierce red light, and rolling volumes of smoke, like foam-fringed waves, were rushing and whirling through the murky sky. Arthur rushed to some rising ground in the neighborhood. A moment was enough to convince him. Cherton Abbey was on fire.

He ran to the lodge-gates of the abbey and forced them open.

The lodge-keeper was on the point of leaving for the house.

"Bad business, David," he said to the man. "Are the people safe?" he added, hurriedly, as accompanied by David he ran swiftly up the avenue toward the abbey.

"We've just sent a messenger to Troy, and my son has gone to Mr. Woodville's," said the man, in breathless tones, as he ran by Arthur's side.

When they reached the abbey Arthur found that one wing of the huge building was almost completely enveloped in flames.

"Are you all safe?" he cried out to a group of domestics who were standing near, paralyzed with fear.

"Oh, for God's sake, Mr. Templeton, save Sybil!" shrieked an old lady, coming forward and falling upon her knees at his feet.

He recognized Miss Chinnery—Sybil's aunt. "Is she still in the house?" he asked, in a hoarse voice.

"Yes; I entreated her to come with me, and she promised to follow me; but instead of doing so, she went back to try and save her old nurse, who is a helpless invalid. Oh, what shall I do—what shall I do?"

"Is she in the right or left wing?"

"In the right!" answered several voices.

"Ladders here!—quick!" shouted Arthur, as he ran nearly to the end of the right wing, the front of which was a lurid mass of flame.

A ladder was brought. Several people tried to dissuade him from the desperate undertaking, but sternly pushing them aside, he ran up the ladder with amazing rapidity.

Gaining the parapet, he ran along the narrow ledge until he came to a small window, which he broke in, and, heedless of consequences, plunged into the house and into the reeking volumes of smoke which filled the place.

He gained a long corridor, at one end of which the flames were shooting up in quivering tongues of fire, while round and about him the walls cracked and groaned with the heat; and ever and anon, above the deep rumbling of the approaching conflagration, thunderous crashes resounded as the heavy walls and solid blocks of masonry gave way and melted into the devouring flames.

On he went, until he reached a room which was within a few yards of the advancing fire. The smoke nearly choked him. Still he groped his way about. Suddenly his hand touched a cold face, and he leaned over it. It was the body of the nurse.

The crackling of the flames, as they burnt through the thick walls, warned him that in a few minutes he would have to leave or perish. He listened intently. A low groan caught his ear. In a moment he found Sybil. She was on her knees in a corner of the room.

Quick as thought he clasped her in his arms,

for she was insensible now, and rushed back. He struggled bravely through the smoke, and at length reached the parapet. Holding his precious burden tightly to his breast, he ran along the ledge.

There was not a moment to be lost, for the flames were now darting out of the windows immediately below him, and the smoke almost stifled him.

With a roar like ten thousand angry lions the demon flames suddenly rent the roof in twain, and the wall upon which he now stood trembled as a reed trembles in the wind.

Clasping the insensible girl to his breast he gently let himself over the ledge.

Thank God! the ladder was firm and safe!

Then cautiously he went down step by step, and amid the ringing cheers of the very considerable crowd which had now gathered about the house, he handed Sybil over to her friends.

Mr. Woodville, Jocelyn, and several other gentlemen warmly congratulated Arthur, who, however, paid little heed to their words.

The fire-engine had now come from Troy, and willing hands from the neighborhood assisted the fire brigade in their efforts to save a portion of the abbey at any rate.

Sybil so far recovered consciousness as to be able to explain to those about her that the nurse had died in her arms—died murmuring prayers for the safety of her young mistress. In all probability the aged creature was thus mercifully spared a death of terrible agony in the flames.

Arthur, feeling that he had done his duty for the night, escaped unnoticed from the crowd, and returned to Pinewood, jaded, but very grateful and very happy.

CHAPTER VII.

LOVE'S VICTORY.

SEVERAL days had elapsed since the disastrous fire at Cherton Abbey, and Sybil Vernon was slowly recovering from the nervous shock which she sustained on that terrible night.

She was staying at The Towers, where she was visited daily by Doctor Chalmers, a local practitioner of high repute.

For the first time since her arrival, she was permitted this morning to rise from her bed and sit in an easy-chair by the open window.

It was a beautiful day, with a soft blue sky overhead, flecked here and there with snowy patches of cloud; and the sun shone brightly upon the earth, and in its glowing beams the dew on the grass sparkled and flashed like diamonds.

A gentle breeze from the west, laden with the perfume of wild flowers, blew in at the open window, and softly kissed the pale face of the reclining girl. And from wood and meadow came the joyous caroling of happy birds, soothing her mind with sweet pictures of the beauties of summer.

"How sweet life is upon a day like this!" she murmured. "Janet," she added, addressing her maid, "have you heard anything about Mr. Templeton? Is he quite well?"

The maid shook her head, but made no reply.

"Why don't you answer me?" continued Sybil.

"Well, miss, the doctor told me not to answer questions, for fear of disturbing you."

"Never mind the doctor," said Sybil, urgently.

"Mr. Templeton is quite well, miss."

"Thank God!"

"You know, I suppose, that he is about to leave Pinewood?" continued Janet, who was an inveterate chatterer.

"Yes."

"Everybody's very sorry, miss. Mr. Templeton is such a favorite. But there's no help for it now, I suppose. They do say that you've had a hand in sending him away. But I don't believe that, miss—no fear!"

"Why do people say such cruel things, Janet?" said Sybil, faintly.

"Ah, that's just what I say, miss. The doctor's young man told me the other day that it's all over Troy that you brought an action against Mr. Templeton, and that he has to leave the country, as he hasn't money to pay lawyers to defend him. Which is all lies, and so I told Sam—I mean the doctor's young man—miss."

Sybil was cut to the heart when she heard this, but she said nothing.

"Mr. Templeton's marriage is—What's the matter, miss?" cried out the servant, as a deadly pallor suddenly came into her mistress's face.

After a moment or two Sybil revived, and said:

"Just a slight attack; I'm all right again."

A rap at the door announced visitors, and in another moment Miss Chinnery and the doctor entered the room.

"Now I can see at once that you have been disturbed," he said, as he cast a searching glance at Sybil's face. "What silly tattle have you been saying?" he added, turning to Janet, who, with a guilty expression of face, was trying to escape unnoticed from the room.

"About Mr. Templeton, sir," meekly replied the maid.

"You have neglected my instructions. Leave the room!" he said, sternly.

"I alone am to blame, doctor. I feel quite well enough now to talk about—about anything," remarked Sybil, with a faint smile.

Doctor Chalmers, having satisfied himself that she had made satisfactory progress since his last visit, turned to her aunt, who was anxiously watching his face as he timed Sybil's pulse, and remarked:

"Yes, we're doing remarkably well; and there is no reason why we shouldn't go out for a drive to-day."

"That's good news, doctor, indeed!" said the old lady, delightedly.

"Mind, not more than a mile!" he continued, with a grave smile.

"Not as far as Pinewood, even, just to say a few words?" cried out Sybil, in a pleading tone.

"I'll forbid the drive altogether if you mention Pinewood again."

And the doctor, as he said this, exchanged a significant glance with Miss Chinnery.

"All right, doctor, I'll obey you." Then, after a moment's pause, she added, "It's reported in the neighborhood, I understand, that I've had something to do with Arthur Templeton's approaching departure from—"

She stopped, then struggled to continue, and burst into a flood of tears.

"I understand you perfectly," said the doctor in a soothing tone, as he gently placed his hand on her arm and tried to pacify her. "And you wish me to contradict the report, eh?"

"Yes, if you please. I cannot bear the thought of being regarded as the cause of Mr. Templeton's misfortunes!"

The doctor promised faithfully to give effect to her wishes, and soon afterward left her in charge of her aunt.

Sybil gradually grew more composed, and after half an hour's quiet chat with Miss Chinnery, was able to go down-stairs to the morning-room, where she met Mrs. Woodville and Jocelyn, both of whom cordially congratulated her on her recovery.

In a few minutes Mrs. Woodville and Miss Chinnery left the room, thinking that after a week's separation the young people might like to confer alone for a little time.

Sybil was afraid that her betrothed would now kiss her, but he merely pressed her hand to his lips with a cordiality that was rather friendly than tender.

"I'm so glad to see you up again, dear Sybil!" he said, in a tone of frank sympathy.

"Ah! what a terrible escape I've had, my good Jocelyn!"

"Terrible indeed!" he echoed.

"I'm so anxious to tell Arthur Templeton

how deeply grateful I am to him!" she remarked, after a short pause.

"Naturally. You owe your life to him. He is a noble fellow, truly, and we are all proud of him now. It is a pity that he is so distant, and, if I must say it, so very unfriendly to his neighbors."

"He has good reasons for his conduct, I am sure," she said, meditatively.

"No doubt; but when father wrote to him a few days ago, asking for an interview, he might have granted it. Father wished to thank him personally on your behalf and on his own behalf; but Templeton declined to see him, saying that he was very busy in completing his arrangements for leaving Pinewood."

"If you called, I'm sure that he'd see you, and I should prefer you to take my message to him. Will you oblige me in this matter, Jocelyn?" And she looked at him appealingly.

The request evidently caused him some annoyance, and for a minute or two he was silent.

"Then, in a low tone, he said, 'Templeton is such a strange fellow now that I'm doubtful whether he would treat me civilly or not. I never knew a man upon whom trouble has had such a very disagreeable effect, though we know that the essential features of his character are unchanged.'"

"Perhaps for my sake he will treat you as of old, Jocelyn. We must be very tender with a man whose life has been full of trial and of pain."

"Yes; I agree with you, Sybil."

"Then you will go to Pinewood to-day?"

"Yes."

"Aunt must go with you, of course; so that if Templeton is absent, you may see Mrs. Templeton and her pretty daughter."

Jocelyn started, and turned his head away to escape Sybil's searching glances.

"By the way," she continued, "I should like to send a wedding-present to Miss Templeton. I'm so anxious to be on good terms with the Templetons now—so anxious, at any rate, to show Arthur that I am not ungrateful. Every moment of my life is due to him, every—"

She faltered, and again the tears coursed down her cheeks, but she checked any further display of feeling.

"I'm so weak!" she murmured apologetically, as she placed her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Well, what am I to say to Templeton? The kinder the message, the better I shall like it," he said, with a frank smile.

"Tell him that my heart is full of gratitude, and that I long to see him to tell him so; and that—oh! that I pray night and day for his welfare!"

"Yes; I'll not forget."

"Of course, the moment that the doctor gives me permission, I'll call upon him."

She was silent for a moment.

"You'll do your best to be friendly with Templeton, dear Jocelyn, for my sake?" she added, with affectionate emphasis.

"Certainly. By the way, Sybil— Now don't be frightened!" he remarked, observing a sudden change in her face.

"Oh, I'm not frightened, Jocelyn; but your constrained and formal tone is not welcome. Speak to me in your own friendly way."

And she looked up at him, and smiled with ingenuous tenderness.

"Well, you see, I know that it's not an agreeable subject to talk about—I mean that it's not agreeable to you," he continued, hesitatingly.

"I can guess what it is, and unless I am greatly mistaken, the subject is not particularly pleasing to my dear friend, Jocelyn!" and her dark eyes looked into his with searching intensity for a moment.

"I'll not say that, Sybil; but at any rate, I'm glad to see that we understand one another. Well, my father is very urgent about our mar-

riage, and so is mother, and between the two, my life is nearly worried out of me. The marriage arrangements are being made; already father is in correspondence with a friend of his in Newport, who has a cottage to let, where, according to the present plans, we are to spend our honeymoon."

"At present, Jocelyn, I don't know what to say. I shouldn't like to cause my dear guardian—your father—any anxiety or pain, if I can possibly avoid doing so; but—" and she stopped, and then added, with a timid laugh, "we mustn't give way to him in all things."

"Well, I'm glad that I've mentioned the matter to you, at any rate. You will, I am sure, understand that any steps of an urgent kind which my parents may take will not have my approval. In other words, I will do nothing that will give you pain."

"I know that, Jocelyn, dear, good friend!"

And their eyes met in a glance, which was full of affectionate sympathy and trust.

Later on in the day, Sybil and Mrs. Woodville went out for a drive, and Jocelyn and Miss Chinnery proceeded to Pinewood. They found Mrs. Templeton at home, and were very cordially greeted by the widow.

"My nephew is making preparations for our departure, so that his time is very much occupied. He went to Troy this morning, and I don't expect him back until a late hour," said Mrs. Templeton, in reply to their inquiries.

At this moment Alice entered the room, and was introduced to the two visitors.

Miss Chinnery and Mrs. Templeton, like the two old gossips that they were, became absorbed in some topic of local interest, and this gave the young man an opportunity which he had long desired.

"I suppose you've heard the particulars of your cousin's noble conduct," he said with a nervous smile. He was not at all at home in the presence of this young lady to day; indeed, for the matter of that, she, too, was feeling awkward and embarrassed.

"No, I have not," she said coldly.

"Indeed! I'm surprised at that! It's the great topic of conversation in the neighborhood!"

"My cousin is not the man to talk much of his good deeds," she remarked, in the same chilling tone.

"Well, it's only right that you should know all about it; and if you don't mind, I'll tell you."

She bowed, and then he gave her a glowing account of Arthur Templeton's heroic conduct, dwelling, with cordial emphasis, on the daring and courage displayed on that terribly eventful occasion.

"And I am commissioned," he added, in conclusion, "to convey Miss Vernon's thanks to him, and to explain that she will thank him in person when she is well enough."

"It is gratifying to know that she appreciates the great service which he rendered her," said Alice, still unrelentingly cold and formal.

"She has always had a very high opinion of Arthur, and she has never ceased to regard him with affectionate solicitude."

And his manner became earnestly impressive and tender.

"She has a strange way of showing her solicitude," said Alice, with a scarcely perceptible sneer.

"If you refer to the right-of-way question, I may as well tell you that she was opposed to the course taken by her lawyer, who was acting under instructions from my father, and when the matter was brought to a crisis by the fight in the grove, she stopped all proceedings, and was very angry, and is still very angry, that Mr. Templeton should have been subjected to so much injury and annoyance."

"Oh, of course, you'll take her part!"

But Alice had no sooner said this than she regretted it.

"I'm anxious," said he, in a low and earnest voice, "to promote a good understanding between your cousin and Sybil Vernon. If Arthur knew how deeply she sympathizes with

him in his troubles, and how anxiously she desires his welfare, it could not fail to create an effect upon his mind which would be favorable to my wishes."

"You are playing a strange part, Mr. Woodville," she said, in a cutting voice.

They were sitting in the shelter of a deep bay window, some little distance from the two elderly ladies, and they were thus enabled to talk with greater freedom than would otherwise have been possible.

"I'm afraid, Miss Templeton, that you are determined to regard me as a designing and insincere man. You have wronged me in the past; do not wrong me now!"

"You have a very treacherous memory; but I think the less we say about the past the better." And her blue eyes flashed with scornful anger as she now looked at him.

"Will you grant me the favor of a few words of explanation?" he pleaded with urgent tenderness.

"For what purpose?"

"I believe that I could succeed in removing certain cruel misunderstandings if we were alone for a few minutes."

"One word, Mr. Woodville. Is Miss Vernon about to become your wife?" she inquired, in a low, trembling tone.

"If you will grant me this interview, I will explain everything to you—everything! Oh, do not refuse me!"

She rose from her chair.

"Mr. Woodville wishes to look at the pictures, mamma," she said, as she went toward the door, followed by Jocelyn.

"All right, Alice. You'll find us here when you come back," replied Mrs. Templeton, who was thoroughly enjoying her gossip with Miss Chinnery.

The young people left the room and proceeded to the drawing-room.

"Now, I've acted very foolishly, I know, in acceding to your strange request," remarked Alice, as they walked slowly up to the apartment.

"You have acted with great kindness, Miss Templeton," said he, in a voice that still betrayed great nervousness. "You asked me," he resumed, after a moment's silence, "if a marriage was about to take place between Miss Vernon and myself, or, rather, if we were engaged. As a matter of fact, my parents desire such a marriage, and in deference to their wishes, an engagement does exist, but our hearts are not concerned in it. No; on my faith and honor as a gentleman, both Sybil and myself desire to be free."

"I'm surprised to hear that. Perhaps when you are married you will learn to love each other," she said, timidly.

"Married! We shall never be man and wife; but we shall always be sincere and faithful friends. Ah, if you had only listened to the explanation which I wished to make when we met that morning on the Troy road I should not have entered into any engagement with Sybil, and it would have saved us both much pain."

"I don't quite see why my refusal to listen to your explanation should have had the effect you mention," said Alice, in a tone of indifference.

"Then have you quite forgotten our meeting in the academy?" he inquired, as he sought, with eager tenderness, to read the expression of her blue eyes.

"It is too late to refer to that, Mr. Woodville; and, indeed, it would be wrong of me to listen to any further reference to it now," she replied.

He stopped, and said, in a voice that was husky with emotion: "Am I speaking to the affianced wife of Arthur Templeton?"

As she saw the look of agony now creeping slowly over his face her heart was touched with pity for him, and the tears rose unbidden to her eyes.

"He has asked me to be his wife, and I—"

He fell back from her, panting and gasping like one stricken to the very heart.

"You are in pain?" she cried out, as she approached him.

"I am, Alice; but I must bear it. Oh, my darling, my darling!"—and he stretched his arms out toward her.

"I cannot—I dare not!"

She stopped, and clasping her hands together, raised her face heavenward.

"If you marry Templeton, you will break two hearts! Yes, Alice, for Sybil loves him as dearly as I love you!"

"But do you love me?" she sobbed.

A quick flush of joy mantled in his face as he caught her in his arms, and pressed her with convulsive tenderness to his breast.

And then their lips met in a lingering pressure of love, and they knew that their hearts were united forever.

The two lovers, after a very tender conference, returned to the sitting-room, and in a few minutes Jocelyn and Miss Chinnery left Pinewood. And need it be told that the faded flower was kissed again and again that night by its fair owner? Alice thought that of all the happy girls in the world, she was the happiest.

CHAPTER VIII.

AN AMATEUR DETECTIVE.

BEFORE the lapse of many days, Sybil Vernon's condition was so satisfactory that all restrictions as to her movements were withdrawn by the doctor. Her first wish now was to call at Pinewood, and personally thank Arthur Templeton for his gallant conduct; and she was about to give effect to this wish, when she received a most unexpected visit from Miss Eldred, Murdock's housekeeper, which completely altered her plans. Sybil was still at The Towers, and received her visitor in the library, where there was not much chance of their being disturbed.

"I hope that you'll forgive me for troubling you, Miss Vernon," said Miss Eldred, seating herself in obedience to Sybil's invitation. "Knowing that you wish well to Mr. Arthur, I thought that if I called and asked you to help me in my struggle to assist him that you would be sure to do so," she added, in a tone of appealing anxiety.

"And you judged rightly, Miss Eldred; and I am grateful to you for remembering that the interests of the Templeton family are as dear to me as ever. Ah! times may change, but my heart has not changed; rather has it now become devoted to the purpose of serving Arthur Templeton, to whom I owe my life."

"Well, then," resumed the housekeeper, with a pleased smile, "this is the object of my visit."

"When I left Pinewood, in obedience to Mr. Arthur's wishes, as he would not let me remain unless I was willing to receive my usual wages, which, knowing his circumstances, I had refused, I accepted Mr. Murdock's offer of a place in his establishment."

"I knew well that Mr. Murdock merely wished to keep me under his own eyes, so that I could not make those efforts on Mr. Arthur's behalf which he suspected, and rightly suspected, were the object of my life."

"I have tried, but in vain, to obtain information in his house."

"He is so watchful and cunning, that up to the present he has defeated me."

"However, within the last few weeks I have seen one or two things which, as time presses, I think we ought to follow up."

"What are they? Tell me!" cried out Sybil, eagerly.

The prospect of serving Arthur Templeton had filled her heart with joy.

"The first was this," resumed Miss Eldred, with methodical precision. "A little time ago, Mr. Murdock received a letter bearing the New York post-mark."

"I took particular notice of the writing on the envelope, and somehow or other I thought that I recognized it."

"At any rate, no sooner did Mr. Murdock read the letter than he started by the night express for New York."

"Then I searched through some of the old papers in the office and found writing which corresponded with the writing on the envelope."

"Ah!" exclaimed Sybil, as she leant forward and listened with absorbing intensity to the housekeeper's story.

"And," continued she, "further inquiries convinced me that a clerk of the name of Stevens was the writer of the letter which had caused Mr. Murdock to start for New York in such an expeditious manner."

"That clerk left Murdock's employ eight years ago, and has not been seen since."

"Now, I fancy that man could give us valuable information on the subject of the Templeton mortgage, if we could find him."

"At all events, seeing that in a few days, now, Mr. Arthur will have to surrender his house to Murdock unless something such as we desire should be discovered, I think that the circumstance ought to be made use of, and without delay."

"Certainly; I cordially agree with you. But what do you propose?"

"Well, some one ought to go to New York, and watch Mr. Murdock's movements."

"I'm afraid to go, as he might return at any moment, and so defeat our purpose."

"For, if I rouse his suspicions now, our last chance is gone!"

"Do you know his address in the city?" asked Sybil, quickly.

"Yes; I forward his letters to him every day to this address." And she showed a slip of paper to Sybil, who at once took possession of it.

"I'll go to New York myself," Miss Vernon said, decisively. "Of course, no one must know of our purpose," she added, as she rose from her chair, her every movement indicating resolute energy.

"But are you well enough to undertake the journey?" inquired the housekeeper, anxiously.

"The hope of serving Arthur Templeton has put new life into me! Oh, Miss Eldred, I would give the world to be able to repay, in part, the deep debt of gratitude which I owe to the dear companion of my childhood, Arthur Templeton!"

The good woman sighed deeply, and then said:

"In the old days, Miss Sybil, I cherished hopes which can, alas! never be realized!"

After a pause, she added:

"I understand that your marriage is to take place shortly. Is that true, Miss Vernon?"

"Nothing has been settled yet. I mean to direct my attention solely to this business. I will start to-night, and you will either see or hear from me in the course of the next few days."

After exchanging a few words of cordial sympathy with Sybil, Miss Eldred left The Towers, and Miss Vernon proceeded to make arrangements for her journey.

She explained to Mrs. Woodville that urgent private business necessitated her immediate departure from The Towers, exchanged a few hurried words with Jocelyn, and then devoted her attention to packing up.

Her aunt insisted upon accompanying her.

"You will be back in a few days, dear?" remarked Mrs. Woodville as she attended Sybil down to the hall.

"Yes, my dear friend; I'm sure not to be longer."

"How on earth am I to console Jocelyn during your absence?"

"Tell him to go to Pinewood, and study the pictures there," chimed in Miss Chinnery, with a shrewd smile.

Jocelyn colored up, and avoided his mother's inquiring glance by the simple expedient of walking away.

Their farewells were exchanged, and Sybil and her aunt left The Towers and drove to the

station, where they caught the New York train.

Murdock was stopping at a private hotel on Broadway, and Sybil succeeded in engaging rooms in a house at the opposite side of the street.

On the following morning she stationed herself at a window which commanded a view of the entrance to the hotel; and in less than an hour she was rewarded by seeing Murdock, who issued from the house, and paused on the steps for a moment.

Sybil was ready, and having assured her aunt that she would soon return, and that there was no occasion for being apprehensive on her account, left the hotel as Murdock moved down the steps, and walked toward the City Hall.

In a few minutes, he hailed a hack, and drove away.

Sybil quickly engaged one, too, and told the driver to follow the vehicle occupied by the lawyer.

They drove for some distance through a miserable portion of the city, and finally the cab in front stopped at the corner of a mean-looking street.

Sybil dismissed her carriage and followed the lawyer, who was now walking down the street.

He entered a tall, dingy house, in the front windows of which several cards were exhibited, with the familiar announcement printed thereon:—

"APARTMENTS TO LET."

Taking up her position some little distance from this house, she watched for the departure of Murdock.

In a half an hour he again appeared, and walked swiftly away.

Then she went to the house, inquired about the apartments, and was shown into the parlor by a slovenly, red-nosed woman, who appeared to be afflicted with a chronic snuffle.

She arranged to take two rooms in the house, and paid a deposit, which put the landlady in excellent humor.

"Have you any lodgers at present?" inquired Sybil, in a tone of friendly inquiry.

"Only one, miss. A miserable creature he is, too. It's well for him that he has such a friend as that gent as just went out—Mr. Cartwright—who pays his bills, and pays the doctor, and, in fact, behaves himself like a real gentleman," said the landlady.

"Is your lodger an invalid, then?" inquired Sybil, who had taken note of the fact that Murdock had assumed the name of Cartwright.

"Yes, miss; but he don't keep his bed. He remains in the sitting-room all day, groaning an' moaning like—like—well, like anything."

"What's the matter with him?"

"Mr. Cartwright says sunstroke. I say drink," replied the old woman, emphatically.

"Did you say that his name was—"

Sybil paused.

"Stevens, miss," said the landlady, innocently.

Miss Vernon felt at once that she was on the right track, but she carefully abstained from any display of feeling which might have provoked the suspicions of the landlady.

"I don't know how long I may want these rooms," she remarked, after a moment's silence; "but in any case I will engage them for a month. I may not make much use of them, as I have several friends in New York with whom I shall spend the greater part of my time."

The landlady was highly pleased with this arrangement, and when Sybil followed it up by handing her a dollar to buy whatever her fancy should suggest for a treat, she was hardly able to restrain her delight.

In a few minutes the woman left the house to make these purchases, and then Sybil mounted the stairs, knocked at a door on the next landing, and in obedience to a feeble cry of "Come in," entered the room.

A pale, haggard looking man, with trembling limbs and dim, bloodshot eyes, was

doubled up on a sofa in a corner of the room like a beaten hound.

"Your name is Stevens, I think?" she said, as she looked at him with a penetrating intensity of glance.

He started up, and returned her glance with a feeble stare.

"You had a visitor here just now?" she continued, without taking her eyes from his face.

"Yes—Mr. Cartwright."

"His name is not Cartwright, and you know that very well!"

Drawing herself up to her full height, and eyeing him so that he fairly winced under the unrelenting sternness of her glance, she added:

"His name is Samuel Murdock, and—"

"Oh, curse the name and curse the man!" shrieked the wretched creature, in a sudden frenzy, which seemed to endow him with a wild strength and activity. "I knew it was coming! I felt it was coming! It has been haunting me night and day, and now it has come!"

And he flung himself back on the sofa and moaned despairingly.

"Your mind is burdened with guilt. You have done a grievous wrong to a noble and high-minded man, and Murdock reaps the benefit. Is that not so?"

And she bent over him to catch his reply.

He tried to hide his face from her. She grasped his arm, and wrenching it aside, looked piercingly at him, then said, in a low, intense tone:

"Arthur Templeton!"

It was enough. That name seemed to act like a shock from a galvanic battery, and flinging himself on the floor, he knelt at her feet.

"I'm not the chief culprit! I only made use of my guilty knowledge to get money out of Murdock. Oh, have mercy upon me, good lady, for indeed I have never known what it was to be happy since I gave way to this horrible temptation!"

And he crawled to her feet, and sought to kiss the hem of her dress.

"If you tell me the truth now, and deliver up to me any documents in your possession, I will not fail to use my influence in your behalf."

He rose to his feet, staggered out of the room, and returned again in a moment, with a small bundle of papers in his hand.

"Eight years ago," he said, in a low, penitential tone, as he stood before her with bowed head, "I was in Murdock's office."

"On the death of the late Mr. Templeton, Murdock, who was that gentleman's lawyer, claimed to hold the title-deeds of the Templeton estates against advances which he had made to the deceased gentleman. He produced accounts and vouchers in support of his claim, which were duly recognized by Mr. Arthur Templeton."

"But I knew very well that Murdock had been fully paid by the late Mr. Templeton, and I managed to obtain the receipts which Murdock had given against the various payments made to him on account of the loan."

"I threatened to produce these receipts unless he made me an ample yearly allowance, to which he agreed, stipulating only that I should never again return to Troy or its neighborhood."

"Latterly my mind has been greatly troubled on account of the rascally business, and I wrote to Murdock, telling him that if I didn't make a clean breast of it I would go mad."

"So he has been visiting me, and I promised to obey him, and to keep quiet, in consideration of a pension of one thousand a year."

"Have you got the receipts?" eagerly inquired Sybil.

"No! I have handed them to Murdock!" and the wretched man groaned aloud in an agony of repentance.

"Too late!—too late!" murmured Sybil in a low voice, as she clasped her hands convulsively together, and sought to control her

emotion in the presence of this disappointment.

"These vouchers," said the wretched creature, "which relate to the transaction in question, may be of some assistance to you, Miss Vernon. Take them in God's name!" And he handed the documents to her.

"Does Murdock know of the existence of these vouchers?" she asked, as she carefully looked through the papers.

"He believes that they have been destroyed. I fear, now that he has the receipts in his possession, they will not greatly serve your purpose. Oh, Miss Vernon! would that you had come in but a few minutes before, and then—"

"Wretched man," cried out Sybil, angrily, "you have indeed much to answer for! These papers are of little, if any, value, as far as I can see." She walked about the room in silence for a few minutes, and then, confronting the unhappy wretch, said: "You must—mind you, must—go down to-morrow to Mr. Templeton's residence, and I will probably see you there. All is not yet lost—though, indeed, I fear that that wretch Murdock will be triumphant!"

"I will not fail you, Miss Vernon. To-night I will start for Troy, and, with God's help, I will be at Pinewood to-morrow; though, with you, I have little hope now of defeating Murdock's designs. Recollect that he is a most determined as well as clever man!"

Sybil was impressed by the evident sincerity of Stevens, and believing in his repentance and his desire to aid her in the purpose which she had in view, she thus addressed him: "I will not fail to use my influence on your behalf should we succeed in rescuing Pinewood from the clutch of Murdock. In any case recollect this: that your efforts now to undo the evil of which you have been guilty will plead for you, not only here, but there!" And she solemnly raised her eyes aloft.

"May Heaven bless you for those kind words, miss!" cried out the feeble creature, as he clasped his hands together and sobbed like a child.

Sybil addressed a few comforting words to him, and then went down-stairs, where she met the landlady, who had just returned to the house. Giving the old woman to understand that she would probably not return again, and begging of her to accept as a gift the various good things just purchased, she left the house, and quickly returned to Broadway. As she reached her hotel she saw Murdock on the point of leaving the one opposite, and guessed that he was about to return to Troy.

CHAPTER IX.

UNPLEASANT INTERVIEWS.

"WELL now, Sybil, will you tell me about this mysterious business which has been engrossing your attention?" said Miss Chinnery, when she met her niece in their room, after her return to the hotel.

"You'll know all about it in good time, auntie," replied Sybil, not deeming it safe to say anything of her discovery to her amiable relative, whose gossiping tendencies were well known to her.

Late in the afternoon they left New York, and reached The Towers about nine o'clock. When Sybil joined the family circle in the drawing-room, Mr. Woodville, who had been away from home when she started on her journey, looked at her with an expression that clearly indicated deep displeasure.

"I regret, Sybil, that you should have undertaken this mysterious journey to New York without having first consulted your old guardian, and, I confidently hope, your future father-in-law!" said he, in his pompous tones.

"I am very sorry, dear Mr. Woodville, that circumstances did not allow me to speak to you before leaving, but what could I do?" And she looked at him and smiled vivaciously, though she was elated with the success of her trip, but was anxious to be on good terms with him now.

"It has been customary hitherto," observed the banker after a short pause, "to consult me on matters appertaining to the administration of the Cherton property."

"You are under some misapprehension, for my visit to New York had nothing to do with the administration of my own property," she said in a tone of friendly explanation.

Mr. Woodville rose from his chair and left the room.

He was clearly incensed with Sybil for having ignored his authority, and would probably observe an attitude of rigid sternness toward her for the next few days.

Mrs. Woodville soon followed her husband, and then Sybil found herself alone with Jocelyn. She noticed that he was unusually silent and reserved, and though they were now alone he still observed this unfriendly attitude.

"Now, Master Jocelyn, why are you looking so glum and distant this evening?" she said, with playful cordiality, as she seated herself near him and gently tapped him on the arm.

"Oh, I have something to tell you, and I haven't got the courage to speak out!"

And he looked at her with a pleading expression in his blue eyes which indicated much anxiety of feeling.

"Why should you be afraid of me? Come, Jocelyn; you know that I am to be depended upon!"

Still he was silent.

"Now, I'll get angry with you if you behave in this way," she continued.

"I'm afraid that you'll be angry with me under any circumstances," he said in a low voice.

"So long as it has no reference to one subject, which we have agreed not to revive except under great pressure, I will listen to you in the most amiable of moods."

He looked at her steadily for a moment, then, clasping her hand with friendly warmth, said: "Sybil, I am in love!"

"I'm delighted to hear it," she answered cordially.

"The beloved one's name is Alice Templeton."

Sybil started.

"Arthur Templeton's cousin?" she asked.

"The same."

"But is she not engaged to Arthur?"

"He wishes to make her his wife, certainly; but there is no love between them, and it would involve a sacrifice on both sides if his purpose were effected."

"Does he know of your intentions?" she asked in a voice that betrayed considerable anxiety.

"No; we thought it better not to let him know anything about it until we are married. He is leaving Pinewood to-morrow, and being a headstrong and impulsive man, he might have refused his consent to the marriage and taken Alice off with him. So—"

He paused, and a smile played about the corners of his mouth as he looked at her with eyes brimming over with humor and delight.

"So what?" she asked, impatiently.

"We're going off to-morrow. Alice is going to live with a nice old lady until we can get married."

"You'll do nothing of the kind, Jocelyn," she remarked, in a tone of playful reproof.

"You're not going to betray me now, Sybil?" he cried out, in a tone of genuine alarm.

"Betray you? I wonder at you saying such a thing!"

After a moment's pause, she added:

"When you see Miss Templeton to-morrow, instead of persuading her to run away, persuade her to tell her cousin of her love for you, and of your desire to make her Mrs. Jocelyn Woodville."

"Are you mad, Sybil?"

"Do as I tell you, and you will not be sorry for having followed my advice."

"But supposing Templeton refuses his consent, and insists on taking Alice away with him, what then?"

"Oh, Templeton will not refuse his consent,

and I am sure that he will not take Alice away with him."

"But he is leaving Pinewood, and he starts for the West in less than a fortnight."

"Is he leaving Pinewood?"

"Yes; Murdock enters into possession to-morrow."

"Take my word for it that Pinewood will remain in the hands of Arthur Templeton!" she said, in a solemn tone, which deeply impressed Jocelyn.

"By Jove, Sybil, you surprise me!" he exclaimed, as he looked at her noble face, which was looking sad and sorrowful now.

"You will obey my instructions?" she asked, after a moment's silence.

"Certainly!"

"Now kiss me, Jocelyn, and call me your dear sister, for such I shall always be!"

"My dear, dear sister!" he said, as he kissed her face with the hearty fondness of a brother.

Unseen and unheard by Sybil and her companion, Mrs. Woodville had entered the room, and had been listening to the latter part of the above conversation. With a quick, angry movement she now stepped forward and confronted them.

"For some time back," she said, passionately, "I have suspected that you were both conspiring to defeat the arrangements which have been made for your welfare; but I little suspected that you, Jocelyn, would have been privy to such an infamous plan as that which I have just overheard. I will instantly inform your father of this shameful business."

"For Heaven's sake, mother, do not act hastily!" pleaded Jocelyn, as he placed himself before the door to bar her exit.

"You will create further complication if you mention the matter to Mr. Woodville now. Jocelyn is determined to marry Miss Templeton, and I cordially approve of his choice. Really, my dear madam, I would advise you to reflect a little before speaking to your husband," observed Sybil, in a tone of suppressed anger.

"Sybil Vernon, your perfidy shocks me! I will not trust myself to speak to you now—false and treacherous girl!" And, so saying, Mrs. Woodville brushed past her son, and left the room.

"What on earth shall we do, Sybil?" cried out the young man despairingly. "If my father should go in a tearing rage to Pinewood, and insult Templeton, then I will inevitably lose Alice."

"You must try and see her to-night, then, if possible; and, if the worst comes to the worst, you will have to carry out your original plan, and remove her from Pinewood until matters take a favorable turn."

She was greatly agitated while speaking, and it was manifest that this incident had exercised a most disturbing effect upon her mind.

"But you forget that Templeton will probably leave Pinewood to-morrow—at least, as far as I know," he said, urgently.

"Yes; but let us hope, at any rate, that something may happen to—"

The fear of failure rose up in her mind while she was speaking, and checked further utterance. The sole chance of success depended on that man Stevens; and how could she trust in him! Perhaps, when he reached Troy, he would again fall into the hands of Murdock, who would take good care to prevent him appearing at Pinewood, and so frustrate completely her last hope of aiding Arthur Templeton.

As these thoughts were passing through her mind, Mr. and Mrs. Woodville entered the room.

"Is it true, Jocelyn, that you contemplate breaking the engagement which exists between you and Sybil?" asked his father in a voice of commanding sternness.

He was pale with anger, and had evidently much difficulty in controlling his temper.

"Circumstances, my dear father, have compelled me to do so. The engagement was

never agreeable to either Sybil or myself, and—"

"I see, I see!" broke in the other abruptly.

"My wishes are to be ignored; the cherished designs of my life are to be frustrated to suit your whims and fancies. But I would have you know, Jocelyn, that in the regulation of these affairs I am master, and I will tolerate no interference with what concerns the honor and dignity of my family."

"Surely you can have no objection to Miss Templeton?" urged Jocelyn, in a voice of entreaty.

"Yes, sir, I have. Your future wife shall be Sybil Vernon, and—"

"I have decided now to decline your son's proposal, Mr. Woodville. Pray understand that!" said Sybil, firmly.

"Oh! I dare say you wish to shield Jocelyn as much as possible; but I am responsible for your future, and I am not going to let you sacrifice yourself for the sake of some romantic whim!"

Mr. Woodville said this in a calmer voice. He was, as usual, confident of overcoming all opposition to his wishes, and this no doubt helped to allay his anger.

"I have no doubt that this is a trick of Arthur Templeton's," chimed in his wife. "He thinks that if he can separate you two, why then he might have a chance of obtaining a rich wife for himself and a rich husband for his cousin."

"He knows nothing whatsoever about the matter," said Jocelyn, energetically.

"Oh, you're a silly boy, Jocelyn!" remarked his father, contemptuously. "Templeton is a sharp and clever fellow, and he has managed to entangle you by the aid of his pretty cousin. I can see it all plainly now. To-morrow I'll call on this astute gentleman and settle the matter for a few thousands. He wants money badly, and that is at the bottom of all this trickery."

"I assure you, father, that Templeton is perfectly innocent of the conduct which you attribute to him. Do not insult the man by such an offer as that which you have just mentioned. The consequences of your so doing might give us all cause for life-long regret!"

And the young man was visibly affected as he said this.

"Nonsense, Jocelyn, nonsense! I'll see Templeton to-morrow and arrange matters with him. You will please make arrangements for leaving here by the first train for town—at any rate you must go by the mid-day express; and I shall follow you in the course of a few days. Meanwhile Sybil will remain under your care," said Mr. Woodville, as he turned to his wife.

Then he rose from his chair, and, with Mrs. Woodville, left the room, evidently under the impression that the young people would respect his wishes, and cease to offer any further opposition to his designs.

"There is only one thing to be done now," said Jocelyn, when his parents had left the room. "I'll go to Pinewood at once, and try to see Templeton himself. I'll endeavor to have a few words with Alice first. If father goes there in the morning he will inevitably defeat my purpose unless I succeed in gaining Templeton's consent to-night."

"I'm so confused and worried now, Jocelyn, that I will not trust myself to give advice. I can only assure you of my hearty wishes for the success of your plans. To-morrow," she added, solemnly, "will decide my fate, and the fate of one who is very dear to me!" The tears rose to her eyes while she was speaking, and as he bent down and kissed her face with brotherly tenderness, she broke forth into a passionate fit of sobbing. "Leave me—leave me!" she cried. "Every moment is precious to you now!"

Swiftly and cautiously he left The Towers, and hurried toward Pinewood. Entering the grounds, he rapidly approached the house, and having reached to within a short distance of the front entrance, paused to consider the next

step which it would be advisable to take. As his eyes scanned the building, he observed lights in the sitting-room; and he resolved upon at once approaching the window of this room, which was but a few feet above the ground, to find out if he could attract the attention of Alice Templeton.

Yes; she was in the room alone. He tapped gently at the window, and she started to her feet, and looked wildly about her; then she approached the window, which was partly open, thus enabling Jocelyn to address her in a low voice.

"Alice—Alice!" he said, as he leaned forward and thrust his hand toward her.

"Is that you, Jocelyn?" she cried out in a tone of alarm.

"Yes; I want to see you, dearest—urgently! Pray come out at once!"

She started back from the window in evident alarm. Then, after a moment's pause, left the room, and reappeared before him in a few seconds.

When they had exchanged the tender greetings of love, he noticed for the first time that she was in tears.

"What is the matter, dearest?" he cried out, as he gently wound his arm around her waist and led her away from the house to the shelter of a clump of neighboring trees.

"Oh, how can I ever tell you? But surely you, too, must have had news?" she said, falteringly.

He looked fixedly at her for a moment; then slowly withdrew a few paces from her, saying: "Alice, have you repented of your promise to me?"

"Listen to me patiently, Jocelyn, and I will tell you all." Then she paused for a moment, resuming again, in a tone of imploring tenderness, "I have been deeply touched by Arthur Templeton's sufferings; and it seems to me that I have acted very selfishly in arranging with you to desert him when he is so lonely and friendless. This feeling has grown upon me to such a degree that I had decided to ask you to postpone everything until we had left Pinewood. In the course of a few days I would speak to Arthur, and tell him of our engagement."

"If you value my love, Alice, you will have to give up that plan. Listen to me. My father knows of my love for you, and is coming here to-morrow to charge Arthur Templeton with being privy to the match, and with having made it in order to procure a rich husband for you. Therefore, I mean to see Arthur to-night and candidly confess to him that we are engaged, and that no earthly power shall separate us!"

"That is utterly impossible, Jocelyn! Arthur is in such a depressed and gloomy state that we do not like to speak to him, even. He spent the greater part of the day at his parents' grave, and now he is in his own room, I believe. Could you not dissuade your father from coming here to-morrow? Tell him that you will never again see me—perhaps that will deter him from bringing such an odious charge against my unhappy cousin."

"How can I possibly do that, Alice?" he cried, in a tone of alarm.

"And do you think that I am base enough to subject my cousin to the indignity which would be involved in your father's conduct?" she asked, with indignant emphasis.

"Then tell Arthur Templeton to-morrow that we are engaged, and that I am willing to enter into a friendly understanding with him on the subject so long as he is willing to respect that engagement. Will you do that, dearest?"

And approaching her, he clasped her to his breast.

"If he is better to-morrow I will do so. Hark!—a footstep!" and she hurriedly withdrew from his embrace. "It is Arthur himself!" she added, in a low voice. "For God's sake, depart!"

He stepped to her side and imprinted a lingering kiss upon her responsive lips.

And thus they parted for the night.

CHAPTER X.

"ONLY THIS—I LOVE YOU STILL."

On the following morning Sybil sent a message to Miss Eldred, requesting that lady to proceed to Pinewood at once. Then, accompanied by Jocelyn and her aunt, neither of whom was yet aware of her purpose, she left The Towers for Arthur Templeton's residence.

On arriving at Pinewood they found a group of servants and laborers at the door of the house, evidently waiting to give their old master a parting cheer on his leaving the "old place."

Sybil was informed that Mr. Templeton was occupied with Mr. Murdock.

She insisted, however, on being instantly shown into the parlor, Jocelyn and her aunt and Miss Eldred remaining in one of the adjoining rooms.

Arthur Templeton, looking fagged and worried, was standing near a table in the center of the room.

The lawyer, looking as bland and amiable as usual, was addressing him in a tone of voice that clearly indicated a keen relish of the proceedings.

In a dim corner of the room an elderly lady was weeping silently, and a beautiful girl was bending over her, evidently trying to administer comfort.

"Miss Vernon!" said Arthur Templeton, in a surprised tone, as he bowed with haughty civility to Sybil.

"Mr. Templeton," she said, as she approached him with outstretched hand, "let me first tell you how deeply grateful I am to you for having rescued me from a cruel death."

He pressed her hand, and smiled faintly.

Murdock then essayed to touch her hand, but retreating from him quickly, she stared at him in silence for a few moments.

"Has Miss Vernon forgotten her old adviser—her—"

The lawyer stopped suddenly. There was something in her glance that disturbed even his equanimity.

"I know you better than you are aware of!" Turning to Templeton she added: "Are you about to surrender your property to this man? And she referred with a scornful gesture to Murdock.

"Certainly; but—"

"You were going to say that I have no right to interfere," she said, quickly.

"Your proceeding is a strange one, certainly," he observed, with a forced laugh.

"It is! It is!"

Up to this she had succeeded in controlling her emotion, but now the tears were glistening in her eyes, and there was an expression of eager tenderness in her face.

For a moment she could not proceed. Then, in a voice that vibrated with passionate scorn, she cried out, while pointing at Murdock, "That man is a thief! That man has been robbing you for eight years! His claim is false! Read those papers, Arthur Templeton!" And she placed the vouchers in his hand.

At this moment, Miss Eldred, followed by Miss Chinnery and Jocelyn, entered the room, while several servants appeared at the door.

"But where are my father's receipts?" cried out Templeton, as he read the papers.

"This is a foul trick to cheat me out of my rights!" yelled the lawyer, as, with pale face and trembling limbs, he shrunk before the wrathful eyes of Templeton.

"The receipts were given up to him by Stevens, whom I traced to New York, and who has confessed the story of his perfidy—his cruel and heartless perfidy!" cried out Sybil.

Then to Arthur, she said, in a tone of infinite tenderness: "Arthur Templeton, you saved my life, and I have been the means of restoring you your rights!"

He could not speak.

A look of delirious joy and tenderness lit up his face, and he stretched his arms out toward her.

Jocelyn ran forward quickly, and caught him as he was falling.

Arthur Templeton had fainted!

When he recovered consciousness, his first word was "Sybil!"

Then they all withdrew—the lawyer was already on his way to Troy—leaving Sybil and Templeton together.

"Why are you crying, Sybil Vernon?" he said, in a faint voice, as he looked at her with love-fraught eyes.

"Because I am happy," she replied, without raising her eyes to his face.

"And yet for years I have regarded you as a proud and distant girl, heedless of memories which were all in all to me, for they were linked with the days of my companionship with you."

"Why should you have had such an unworthy opinion of me? What did I do to deserve it?" she asked him, in a voice of plaintive tenderness.

"Best and noblest of girls, I misjudged you! Poverty and its attendant pains filled my heart with a sort of anger against my old friends; and so I lived on, a constant prey to doubts, and prejudices, and fears. I longed, yes, Sybil, I longed to tell you that though I seemed a stranger, to you, at least, I never could be one, for my mind was ever busy with thoughts of you."

He paused, and strove to master his feelings; but proud and defiant though he was, he gave way, and covered his face to hide the tears which were trickling down his cheeks.

"But why didn't you call upon me? Why did you shun me?"

"Because I felt that I was forgotten," he murmured.

"You were not forgotten for a single day."

He grasped her hand, and raising it to his lips, kissed it with passionate fervor.

"Have you heard that I made a proposal to my cousin, Alice Templeton?" he asked, after a moment's silence.

"Yes."

"Only to-day she told me that she loved some one else, and that she could not be my wife."

"And you feel the disappointment deeply?" she said, in a husky voice.

"No, Sybil Vernon; for I, too, love some one far better than Alice, or any other creature in the world; in fact, I love her with such a deep and absorbing intensity of feeling that I care not what becomes of me if I fail to win her!" He stopped and placed his hand on her shoulder, and said, with a voice charged with tenderness, "Sybil—my Sybil—darling of my heart, will you be my wife?"

With a cry of joy, she fell on his breast, and he folded her in his arms, and his lips met hers in a tremulous kiss of joy and love.

In a few minutes they left the room, looking both very radiant and happy.

Heartly congratulations were then exchanged between the lovers and their friends.

Arthur, in very cordial terms, begged Jocelyn's forgiveness for his unfriendly conduct on a previous occasion, and added: "You have gained the heart of a very good girl, Jocelyn, and Alice has gained the heart of a very good fellow. I heartily wish you both every happiness!"

Sybil did not fail to let Arthur know of Miss Eldred's meritorious conduct, and the faithful housekeeper was at once installed in her old post at Pinewood.

Of course, great difficulty was experienced in obtaining the consent of Mr. and Mrs. Woodville to the new arrangements; but eventually they gave way, and before long became fully reconciled to Jocelyn's choice.

Proceedings were taken against Murdock, and he was sentenced to a long term of imprisonment.

Of course he had to surrender the title-deeds to Templeton, as well as a large sum of money which he had dishonestly acquired by the process before mentioned.

Stevens got off with a light sentence, and

eventually lived a reformed life on a pension allowed him by Sybil.

In one of the early days of spring in the new year, the leading citizens of Troy and its neighborhood were in a state of great excitement.

Carriages drove up to the doors of one of the leading churches and a brilliantly-attired party entered the sacred building.

Ere long they issued forth again, the beautiful young wives leaning lovingly on their husbands, and smiling radiantly through their tears.

Yes; Sybil is now Mrs. Arthur Templeton, and Alice is Mrs. Jocelyn Woodville.

The union of these loving hearts was preserved uninterruptedly for many years, and the trials and pains of the past were forgotten in the blissful happiness of their wedded lives.

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